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ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

A MERCURY PUBLICATION

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MARY ROBERTS RINEHART STANLEY ELLIN

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How does the Mayor of Baltimore relax?

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Mayor of Baltimore

THIS MONTH'S COVER (by Dirone Photography) is the result of a double exposure—a camera freak which in our case was planned in order to portray the evil that sometimes lurks behind the prettiest faces. Here our beauty is planning to use poison. Technically, the "thought" was shot first against a black background, in a position so fixed that it would later fit into the center of the forehead. The same film was then re-exposed to take the close-up portrait of our redhead. Finally, careful re-touching on a color print helped to bring up details and highlights. P.S. This model happens to be a very sweet girl, ignorant of evil.

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ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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THE TRUMPET SOUNDS

by MARY ROBERTS RINEHART

BIG JOE ALLISON HAD SHOT HIS WIFE and cut his own throat. All the Fifth Ward had expected it for some time, except Anna Allison herself. But, then, the ward could have told her some things about Joe that she did not know: his slow quietness and then his occasional violences.

But the ward had not liked Anna, with her bobbed hair and her eyes traveling about looking for admiration. Always like that she was, with her slim legs in silk stockings twinkling along the streets and her challenging look and half smile.

No one was immune from those sly attacks of Anna's.

"Half a dozen eggs," she would say to the grocer, and look up at him from under her lashes. "And don't pick out the bantams. Joe's hollow all the way."

"Head and all, eh?"

"Oh, his head's solid enough," she would say, and laugh a little contemptuously. It was not long before all the ward knew that she had married Joe for reasons of her own, but that those reasons had nothing to do with love.

Mrs. Harrison, who lived above the poolroom across the street, sized her up quickly. "If you ask me," she said, "she's a hussy. And the sooner Joe finds it out the better."

But Anna was too shrewd for that. Joe would come home to a tidy flat, with Anna moving daintily about, and after the supper things were cleaned up he would take her on his knee and sit for a while, content just to hold her.

And Anna would submit. She had a way of running her hand up his sleeve and stroking his great arm, covered with strong, dark hair. "Are you still crazy about me, Joe?"

"You bet I am."

He paid her without question the tributes her vanity demanded. He saw in the tidy flat not a setting for Anna herself but a welcome home to a tired man; thought her fastidious care of her small body was to make it attractive to him, and without being conscious of it felt in her coolness and lack of passion a safeguard.

He did not know that vanity leads more women astray than love.

On Sunday mornings he crept out of bed and went to early mass without disturbing her. Anna had been a Protestant before her marriage, but she had changed her faith as easily as

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she had changed her name, and after a time Joe had given up trying to make a good Catholic of her.

"Now listen, boy," she would say. "I don't care about those things. They were left out of me, somehow. And I'll take what's coming to me in the next world. I'll be a sport all right when the time comes."

That was a favorite expression of hers. Being a sport was the nearest she had to a creed.

Now and then Father Murphy would meet her on the street. A big man was Father Murphy, and an untidy man too for all his holiness. The very spots on his clothing endeared him to a district which could understand the slovenliness of a womanless man better than the preening daintiness of a married Anna. And when Father Murphy met Anna, on Wheeler Street it might be, or on the avenue by the church, Anna would dodge by if she could. When she could not she would stop and inspect him with cool appraisal. Not a spot missed her eyes. And when she finally looked up into his face it would be with a half smile, cynical and suspicious.

When Joe told her of the holiness and austerity of Father Murphy's life she openly sneered.

"Don't you believe it," she said. "He's a *man*, isn't he? I wouldn't trust him around the corner."

And Father Murphy, after a call or two, gave up going to see her. It was not only that she used most of the tricks she knew on him; it was because he felt that behind that young and slightly smiling face there was a wall of hardness that could not be broken down.

But Anna worried him. He began to see her on street corners talking to men, a little flushed, a trifle daring, and Joe off at work at the time. And there came a day when Joe went to see Father Murphy, sitting uncomfortably in the bare parlor and holding his hat on his knees, and asked for a little advice.

"She's young," he said, "and she means no harm. But she likes to play a bit, and people will begin to talk soon."

Father Murphy did the best he could, and in the end Joe carried back with him a holy medal, which Anna laughed at and refused to wear. But the matter preyed on the father's mind. He could reach the generation he understood; not a domestic trouble in the ward for years but had been brought to him. But this new generation was beyond him.

One day he stopped at the bookshop on the avenue and carried home a book called *Practical Talks on Family Life*. He marked some passages, such as: "A woman who dresses without propriety becomes an instrument of Satan," and so on. But how could one speak of propriety to an Anna who openly scoffed at it, or of Satan to one who feared neither God nor devil?

But as time went on and gossip began to reach him he sent to Anna a summons she dared not disobey.

She went in, defiant and wary, and her skirts were shorter and her stock-

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ings thinner than ever before. And Father Murphy saw her, not as she was, but as the product of evil loose in the world, and pityingly put a hand on her shoulder.

"My child," he began. But Anna twitched her shoulder away from him.

"I'll thank you to keep your hands off me," she said, and opening her cheap vanity case with hands that trembled, began to paint her lips.

After that, what could he do? He talked to her — of a wife's duty to her husband and suchlike matters — but she had come armored against him, and never once did he penetrate that armor.

What he did after that it is not easy for a Protestant to understand. He seems to have taken the matter considerably to heart and to have worried more over this one lamb who had gone astray than over the 90 and 9. But Anna went her way, not knowing and not caring. Until the fever came.

How it came nobody knew. It had not visited the Fifth Ward for so long that it found a quarter totally unprepared. And it spread like an evil wind, knocking down here a man, there a woman, again a child. In the red brick hospital around the corner on the avenue the beds were filled in no time, and cots were spread down the center of the wards.

The odor of fever hung over these wards, heavy and fetid. It moved in the flutter of nurses' skirts or to the opening of windows, only to settle again like a germ-laden fog, under which lips dried and bodies twisted and fingers picked at counterpanes.

Screens were moved about, and from behind them came the sickly sweetness of alcohol baths. Feeding cups sat on bedside stands, yellowish rims of dried milk within them. Probationers went around cleansing cracked and dried mouths with glycerine and myrrh, and up in the mortuary lay rows of sheeted bodies, neatly washed, each with the hands devoutly crossed and the jaw tied up with a bandage.

The mortuary was built like a chapel, and when the early morning sunlight flickered in through the windows, which had been covered with colored paper to look like stained glass, it gave an appearance of life to the still faces. Like a resurrection.

Father Murphy was in and out of the hospital at all hours with his shabby black bag. The nurses would place a screen around the bed and a clean towel on the bedside stand, and there Father Murphy would lay out what was essential. And sometimes after he had administered the sacrament he would follow the little procession to the mortuary and stay there to pray. He would wait outside until the nurses had finished and then ask humbly for admission.

"If I am not in the way, my child."

They were all his children: the nurses, the quick and the dead.

He slept but little, and what with work and fasting and prayer Joe and Anna somehow receded into the back of his mind. When Lent began, on

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Ash Wednesday, in his purple cope he blessed the ashes.

"Remember, man, that thou art dust! Scarcely does life begin when death approaches."

And the church seemed to be filled with grief.

"Look death in the face, and thou shalt not sin." And once more the wave of woe and desolation, for the Fifth Ward knew it had sinned and now it looked death in the face.

Joe was there, but Anna, of course, was not.

Time went on. Father Murphy grew thin; his coat hung almost straight in front, and his ruddy cheeks dropped in two dewlaps over his collar. One night, going down Walter's Alley, he heard a faint tapping on the glass of Aaron Kahn's tailor shop — "Ladies' and Gents' Repairing and Pressing" — and breaking in the door himself carried the stricken little man to the hospital.

The night porter was asleep, and they can show you today the marks on the door where Father Murphy kicked it open.

And then one day Joe Allison came to see him again.

The father was sitting still when he entered. He had not felt well for some time, and now his tongue was dried in his head and his eyes were burning in their sockets. But Joe, sitting white-faced across from him, knew neither of those things.

"I guess I'm kinda up against it, Father," said Joe. "It's about Anna I'm speaking."

"I'm sorry to hear that, my son," said Father Murphy, with his tongue clacking against the roof of his mouth. He felt very dizzy. "If she would come to me now, and I'd give her a bit of a talk —"

"It's beyond that," said Joe. "She's got a fellow. I followed her last night when she thought I was working. I haven't been home since. If I go back I'll kill her, Father. I'm afraid to go back."

"I listen to no such talk as that," said Father Murphy sternly and with an effort. "She's young and foolish, but if she has done a wickedness it is no time for her to face her God. You hear me, Joe? I'll go myself." And he tried to get up, but there was a numbness in his legs and he could not move.

"I'll go myself," he said once more, and there was Joe, all clouded in a dark mist and then disappearing altogether. Father Murphy made one more effort, and then collapsed entirely.

Joe stayed around as long as he could. Sprinkled cold water, as one might know he would, got a doctor and later an ambulance, and only faced his own trouble again when Father Murphy was neatly tucked into a hard, smooth bed in Ward C, with a screen around him, because there were no private rooms vacant.

Aaron Kahn was in the next bed.

Joe went home that night. Anna was sitting alone in the dark, and she said nothing when he went in. He turned on the light, and he saw she

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had been crying, but he did not speak to her. He went into the bedroom and went to bed.

After a long time she came creeping in and lay on the edge far away from him. She did it so quietly that she might not have been there at all, except that the bed trembled when she sobbed. But after a while she moved over to him, and ran her hand up and down his arm. Joe's very soul shook under that touch.

"I'm not bad, Joe," she said. "Honest to God, Joe. I just went in there to Casey's for a minute. I came right out. You ask *him*."

"Him" was the man she had been with.

"Then he saw me. I thought he did."

"No! Honest, Joe, I'm telling the truth. I was scared, Joe. I'm scared now. You act so queer."

"I'm thinking," said Joe, and freed his arm.

They set up some sort of a *modus vivendi* after that. Anna stayed in the flat, but after she had straightened it for the day there was nothing to fill in the time. She hated books. Mostly, according to Mrs. Harrison, she stood at a window and looked down at the street. And when Joe came home at night it was to sit under the chandelier in the tiny parlor and read the papers. But he did not read them; mostly he held the page before him and continued to think.

Twice a week, on visiting days, he went to the hospital and sat behind the screen beside Father Murphy's bed. But the father did not know him. Yet — and here was a strange thing — he kept asking for Joe. Joe and Anna.

"I'm here, Father," Joe would say. "What is it?"

"Joe," he would repeat. "Joe and Anna."

It may be that he had carried that last conscious thought of his over the border with him. Or it may be — but who are we to deal in such matters?

And when Joe had gone he would still ask for him.

Except for that the father was fairly quiet. Aaron Kahn, reporting on the matter later, says that Father Murphy mostly thought he was a boy again in Ireland and that the stars outside the window over his head were shining down on Iar Connacht and twinkling on Wicklow Woods. And also that on one very clear night he sat up in his bed and said: "He is born, my children," thinking perhaps that the stars were the Christmas candles shining in the windows of Ireland, to guide the Christ child to each cabin and home. That seems probable, because when a wind came up and closed the door of the ward just after that he heard it and began to whimper. Strange to think of Father Murphy whimpering!

"They cannot come in," he said, with his dried tongue. "The Mother and Child are abroad tonight, and ye have closed the door."

One sees how far he was beyond Joe's reach when on visiting days he sat by the bed with his trouble, and the father babbled on. It was as

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though the only hand Joe could hold to had drawn itself away.

"Don't you know me, Father?"

"Aroon, aroon, Soggarth aroon," would mutter Father Murphy, back in the past and out of reach entirely.

And so things were when there came a day when Joe, reporting for work, was laid off indefinitely, and when he went home at noon to find the bed unmade, the breakfast dishes still in the sink, and Anna out.

He went across the street and took up a position in the window of the pool parlor, and he drank some whiskey when it was offered to him. He had had nothing to drink since his marriage, and it destroyed the last inhibition in him, although on the surface he was cool enough.

At 4 o'clock he saw Anna slipping home. He gave her an hour and then went back; the place was in order by that time, and Anna said she had not been out all day.

Joe caught her by the arms and shook her.

"Look up at me," he said. "Look up at me and repeat that lie."

And when she could not, he got his old army revolver from a table drawer and shot her with the last bullet in it. Then he saw what he had done, and he tried to shoot himself. But the hammer came down with a futile click, and there was Joe still alive, and Anna on the floor.

It was then that he cut his throat.

What matters here, however, is what Aaron Kahn has to say about the matter. For at 5 o'clock by the C Ward clock, which is the time the Wilkins family in the flat below heard the shot, Aaron says that Father Murphy suddenly roused out of a stupor and sat up in his bed.

"What was that?" he said in a sharp tone.

Aaron, who was convalescing, leaned over and drew aside the loose muslin of the screen.

"It's all right, Father," he said. "Lie down or they'll be putting the bandages on you again."

The bandages, Aaron explains, were to hold Father Murphy in his bed because when he thought he was a boy again he would get out of it.

"'Tis Joe!" said the father, staring straight ahead of him. "Joe and Anna, his wife. May God have mercy on their souls!"

From that moment Aaron knew, he says, that something was wrong between Joe Allison and Anna.

Fifteen minutes later the bell of the patrol wagon was heard ringing furiously outside, and, still with the thought of Joe and Anna in his mind, Aaron sent the McNamara boy, who was able to get about, to inquire.

"Go and find out," he said. "The father here is worrying. See who came in."

So the McNamara boy, nothing loath, wandered down the corridor. At last he saw a policeman from the station house nearby on guard outside a door and sitting on a radiator.

"And what's brought you here, Mister O'Leary?" said the McNamara

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boy. "God knows, 'tis here a fellow should be safe from the law, if anywhere."

"It's the truth," said O'Leary. "And when the Fifth Ward learns that, maybe a peaceful man like meself can have some rest."

The McNamara boy cocked an inquiring eye at the door.

"Is that so?" he said. "And you'll be claiming now that it's one of us in there at this minute, maybe."

"I'm not saying."

"Come on and tell me," said the McNamara boy, beginning to wheedle. "Come on, now! Who is it, and what's their trouble?"

O'Leary grinned and weakened.

"I *might* do that thing," he agreed, "if a smart boy like yourself knows of a spot handy where a man can take a puff of a cigarette without a nurse smacking it out of his face."

The news spread like wildfire through the hospital that evening. Joe Allison had shot his wife and cut his own throat.

But at Aaron Kahn's bed it stopped.

Not by so much as a whisper did Aaron let that dire news penetrate beyond the screen. Yet all that evening the father groaned like a soul in purgatory and gave answer to unheard questions. It was, C Ward says, as though the holy angels had brought him the matter and laid it before him.

"Awake, Father Murphy, for there is trouble today. Joe Allison has shot his wife, Anna, and cut his own throat."

"And what shall I be doing then? I am a sick man, and my legs tremble under me if I stand."

"Go and save them," maybe they said, for he would reply, "Aye, Lord, I come," and try to get out of his bed. Aaron had to put him back over and over for fear the nurses would bring the bandages . . .

They had taken Joe and Anna to the emergency ward.

The first thing the nurse on duty there had known of the tragedy was when she heard outside in the hall the familiar shuffling of feet. All policemen know how to carry stretchers and not to keep step.

So she had just time to whisk the white counterpanes off the two beds, leaving their gray woolen blankets ready, and the flat hard pillow with its rubber cover under the slip, when they were brought in.

She knew immediately that this was no ordinary case, for the patrolmen dumped Joe on his bed without ceremony. Not that Joe was conscious, but still — there it was. And by the different manner in which they lifted Anna to hers, although it made no difference to Anna either just then.

"Don't bother about *him*," one of them said. "Here's where your work is, Sister. She's pretty bad, I'm thinking."

And Anna was indeed "pretty bad," although Joe was nothing to write home about either. Finally the policemen went away, taking their rolled-up stretchers with them, and for some time there they lay, the two

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of them, side by side. They might almost have been in their bed at home. Even then Anna was appealing, and it seems rather a pity she could not have seen the admiration she was arousing. But nobody paid any particular attention to Joe, except an interne who was new and enthusiastic, and O'Leary, who was feeling sick like, but who couldn't leave. O'Leary's job was to see that Joe did not escape the gallows by dying.

"I'll hang around a while," he said. "If the girl says anything, you might call me; I'll be outside."

He did not include Joe, it being clear that Joe would not say anything at all for a long time.

So O'Leary went outside for a breath of air, and inside the emergency room the interne cut Joe's sleeve open to give him a hypodermic. And Joe roused and thought it was Anna, touching his arm as she used to. What with one thing and another, the slate of his mind was wiped clean of the last few weeks, and so he reached up and as he patted her hand, his eyes closed.

"Y' all right, honey?" he tried to say. But of course he could not speak.

After a while they separated them, Anna to a woman's ward, where, like Father Murphy, she was screened off. But hospitals use screens in several ways, and so these were for Anna to die behind. And Joe to the operating room to be saved for the law.

And back in their flat Mrs. Harrison and the woman from the apartment beneath straightened things up, all very neat and nice. Indeed, there are some who say that it was Mrs. Harrison who did away with Joe's revolver, carrying it across the street in the leg of her stocking. One thing is certain: there was no revolver there when the officers came to examine the flat. True, she never blinked an eye when she was accused of it, and was willing to swear on a stack of Bibles a foot high that she had not seen it. But the ward suspects her.

However, it did not look as though that or anything else would save Joe if Anna died.

All that was on Wednesday.

The end of Lent was approaching. Already the drug store at the corner of Wheeler Street and Walter's Alley was selling envelopes of egg dyes, and in the windows of some of the houses were bowls of them, red and yellow and blue. All colors.

Wagons came into the market square at dawn each morning and set out on the pavements their lilies and their hyacinths and their tulips, carefully wrapped against the early cold. When the sun rose high enough they were uncovered, and then the children who had been sewed into their flannels at the first frost ran home to be cut out of them.

"It's warm, like summer," they pleaded. "And the flowers are out already."

The Fifth Ward saw few flowers except at Easter.

But there was little real joy in the ward, what with the fever and all.

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And every day the news from the hospital was poor.

"Have you heard how's the father today?"

"He's getting weaker, they're saying."

When on top of that came the tragedy of Joe and Anna, a wave of superstitious terror passed over the district. Sure, then, and the powers of darkness must be loose among them. And there were still three days to go. Three days until the feast of feasts and the end of sorrow and penance. Three days until Easter.

That Wednesday night many of the people made a pilgrimage downtown to the cathedral to pray. It seemed to them that God was perhaps more likely to be there, seeing that their own church was as it was and the ward very likely in disrepute above.

When they got there they slipped in very humbly. And when, during the service, the organ sank into hopeless grief and the candles were extinguished one by one, it seemed to them they could not bear it. At last only one candle remained, and when it had been taken behind the altar and hidden there, it seemed as though their hearts would break.

The Light of the World had gone out. Come back, O Light of the World, and bring us hope again, and peace and mercy.

They waited breathlessly. The church was very still, and then the light returned once more.

Joe lay that night in his bed in the men's surgical ward. He had to breathe through a tube in his throat, and sometimes the tube filled up. Then the sound of Joe's breathing filled the room.

He had no time to think. All he could do was to get air into his lungs and then get it out again. Breathe. Let it out. Breathe. Let it out. All day and all night.

But he was conscious. If a man might die by holding his breath, he would have died. But he could not; he who so wished to die must make his fight for life. Breathe. Let it out. Breathe. Let it out. Oh, God!

The men around him could not sleep. When the nurse came in to clean the tube they muttered their protests or sat up to slap and turn viciously their crumpled pillows.

Joe dared not sleep. Hardly he dared to close his eyes. Air. Air. Open the windows. God, open the windows!

Anna, on the other hand, was quite comfortable. She was not greatly interested in where she was or why she was there. All she wanted was to look at the dirty gray of the ceiling overhead or at the white muslin of her screens and to be let alone.

But something would not let her alone. This something was a voice, and just when she was most comfortable it insisted on asking her a question.

"Was it Joe? *Was it Joe? Was it Joe?*"

When it became really annoying, all easy as she was, she turned her head, and there was a man with a notebook beside her.

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"Was it Joe?" he said again.

"Was what Joe?"

"Who shot you?"

Ah, that was it; she had known there was something, but she had forgotten it in this new peace. Joe had shot her, and now maybe she was going to — She put that away. It was unpleasant.

"What about Joe?" she asked.

"It was Joe did this, wasn't it?"

So that was it too! The dirty dog, trying to make trouble! What had happened was her business and Joe's and for nobody else. There was a queer, mocking look in the eyes she turned on the officer.

"You'd like to know, wouldn't you!" she scoffed in a whisper.

"We know all right."

"Then get out of here and quit bothering me. I want to sleep."

"But it *was* Joe, wasn't it?"

"Oh, get the hell out of here," said Anna wearily. "If you want to know, I did it myself. Take that away and dream on it!" And when he sat back and snapped his notebook shut she smiled faintly. "I did it myself, with my — little hatchet," she added breathlessly.

Just before 2 o'clock the man went away defeated, and the nurse came in and took a look at Anna. Then she went out again and looked at Anna's card: "Sex, female; color, white; age, twenty; religion, R. C."

"Roman Catholic," she reflected. "I'd better get a priest."

But when she proposed this to Anna she only shook her head.

"What's the use?" she said, without bitterness. "I'll take — I'll take what's coming to me." And lapsed into her comfortable stupor again.

But Aaron Kahn insists that she had a priest that night, and that the priest was Father Murphy. And it is well-known that the nurses found a rosary in her hands. They tried to take it away, so they could work around her better, but she would not let it go.

In every hospital there are periods of ebb and full tide.

The full tide is at 4 or so in the afternoon; the ebb begins after midnight, when vitality grows low and resistance weakens. It is then that the temperature charts, which have perhaps been showing high points like the peaks of a mountain range, suddenly begin to go down into the Valley of the Shadow. The line slants; it gets to the safety point, but it does not stop there. It goes down and down — and then perhaps it ceases.

So even at the beginning of the ebb tide that night Father Murphy was very weak. He lay in his bed and looked out at the stars as they used to shine down on Iar Connacht or twinkle on Wicklow Woods, but this time they seemed different to him.

He appeared to think that they were the lights on an altar. And of course so they may be, but who are we to say?

But after a time a fog came up and one by one the stars went out until only one was left. All of C Ward heard him groan when that last star

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was extinguished and speak despairingly aloud:

"The Light of the World has gone out. And I am a worm and no man; the reproach of men and the outcast of people."

But only Aaron the Jew knew that from that moment he lay waiting for its return again or was aware of the great sigh of relief he gave when it came.

"Now have mercy and hope returned to the world," said Father Murphy sonorously, "and I must go about my Father's business."

Aaron heard a soft movement behind the screen and knew what it portended. He stuck his feet into his old slippers and got up, but he was too late. Father Murphy was standing beside his bed, swaying slightly, and the next minute he was pushing past Aaron and out into the ward.

"Y'understand," Aaron says, in telling the story, "if I let him go and the nurse finds it out, I get hell, see? So I ain't taking no chances."

So Aaron caught him by the arm and tried to hold him, but the father shook him off. He seemed amazingly strong all at once. He went straight down the ward and out of the door — just as he was, night garments and bare feet and all. Aaron was frightened almost out of his wits, but he did the best he could — flung a blanket around his shoulders and caught up another for the father, and then followed him into the hall.

For what came after we have only Aaron's word. It seems fairly incredible that those two, Aaron, the Jew, and the priest, could have made their excursion unseen. Yet there is certain evidence to uphold it; for example, Aaron speaks of the odor of boiling coffee in one of the halls. He always says: "They were cooking coffee, you know," and then looks around, as if to a situation he cannot somehow make real — the coffee is the one real thing to which he clings.

But the coffee for the night nurses' supper is cooked far from C Ward, in the women's wing.

Still, there are some things which Aaron may have added later; that about the restless men growing quiet in C Ward as the father passed through it is one; and another is about that stop at the door of Joe's ward, and the father's lifted hand and the word "Peace." At which Joe's breathing grew quieter, and he slept.

But, however that may be, it seems certain that Father Murphy got to Anna Allison that night, and that there he wrestled for some time with the devil for the prize of Anna's obstinate, unshriven little soul. How long he stayed we do not know. Aaron, left at the door of the ward, says it was long enough, what with one thing and another.

"And me in my night-shirt, y'understand," he says plaintively. "Twice I had to hide in a bathroom, and I guess I should maybe kiss myself goodbye, if they caught me there, eh? I'm telling you!"

However, nobody found him, and finally Father Murphy came back

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along the darkened ward. He was apparently still quite strong and full of life, and together they made that strange return journey of theirs, during which the father paused only once, and then at a window. He stood there looking out, and then he said, like a man pleading:

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem! Return to the Lord thy God."

Then he went on, and in the morning he was dead.

Nobody had told Joe whether Anna lived or not, and at first it made no difference, because he was not thinking. But after the first few hours he began to think, and then every time the nurse came to clean out the tube he formed the word with his lips.

"Anna," he would try to say. "Anna?"

But the nurse would only shake her head.

"You mustn't try to talk," she would say.

By the second day he could look around the room, with eyes haunted by deadly terror. Anna? Had he killed Anna? But no one replied to that look. No one, indeed, came near him. The small services of the ward were not for him, nor its kindnesses. In its dragging carpet slippers, on crutches or in wheeled chairs, the ward passed and repassed his bed; it stared and commented. But it avoided him.

He made signals to them, and they ignored him. But finally, on the second day that was, a boy came and stood beside the bed.

"What is it you want?" he asked.

"My wife?" said Joe with his lips, and staring up with his tortured eyes. "Is she alive?"

"Here, Karl," called the boy across the ward. "Lend us your pencil. Maybe he can write it."

But Karl raised himself in his bed and glowered across at Joe.

"I lend no pencil to a murderer," he snarled, and lay back again.

So sure was Joe then that Anna was gone that it made little difference to him after that when he saw the ward humorist gesturing toward his bed and then strangling himself with his hands as with a rope.

It was the same officer who had approached Anna who got his confession from him. Joe offered no difficulties; he nodded "yes" to the questions and even feebly scrawled his name to the paper he was offered.

Then, as if there was still a flicker of hope in him, he tried to write his desperate query beneath his signature. But the pencil fell out of his fingers, and for the first and only time Joe wept.

He lay there, helpless as a baby, and great tears rolled down his cheeks. The officer thought he was weeping for himself!

Good Friday by that time, and the Fifth Ward in double mourning; the shades in Father Murphy's little house drawn, and by afternoon the people flocking to the church, where no lights burned on the altar and hope seemed gone indeed.

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Up one aisle and down the other they went to see Father Murphy lying in state in his church. And outside on the pavement a tale was whispered about, that Aaron the Jew had told: of how he had risen from his bed to save the soul of Anna Allison and had paid this price for that soul.

"He was a good man and holy," they said. "And he died for that strumpet. Evil she came, and evil may she go."

They hoped that she would die.

But Father Murphy lay, very comfortable and majestic, in the light of the candles. Like a man who has earned his rest . . . .

With Saturday, however, things began to brighten up a little. The father, after all, had not been young, and he had died full of good works and saintliness. Little pots of flowers began to come into the hospital, to be distributed in the wards, and the voices of the choir boys at the Episcopal Mission, practicing their Easter anthem, floated in the open windows.

It was warm, too, and sunny. When the men came along the streets outside to clear the fire plugs of their winter deposit of mud, the children took off their shoes and stockings and splashed in the gutters.

But best of all, the fever was receding. The night nurses at the hospital no longer came off duty exhausted to drag themselves to their beds; there was time to clean the feeding cups properly, to put in order the medicine closets, to fold and tidy the sheets.

The long, sad season was over. Soon could the world arise from its knees and go about its business.

All but Joe and Anna, his wife.

Anna was never out of Joe's thoughts; never did the nurse rouse him with a touch on the arm that he did not think it was Anna, and never did he come to full consciousness without dying a thousand deaths of remorse. He had loved her terribly. He knew now that, good or bad as she might have been, he still loved her.

And somehow he saw, too, in that new clairvoyance of his, that she had loved him. How far she had wandered he did not know; it seemed now not to matter. She had come back to him a little frightened, perhaps wary and defiant, but she had come back.

She had come back, and he had killed her.

Anna, Anna!

Anna knew that she was dying. There was no deceiving her. She watched the nurses' faces with eyes that, if sunken, were still shrewd.

"Am I — bad?"

"You're doing fine."

"You're — lying to me."

They had not told her about Joe. But on Holy Saturday toward evening she asked for him.

"I'd like to see Joe," she said.

"Well, maybe we can arrange that later," said the nurse briskly, and looked away. "But you'd better rest now."

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"I'd like to tell him — something."

"Can't you tell me?"

"No."

She lay still and closed her eyes, but her mind was evidently busy, for a little later she called the nurse back.

"I guess — I'd better not see him — after all," she said, with that new breathlessness in her voice.

She had been thinking it over, you see, and of course she could not see Joe. He would give it all away, and then the law would get him. After that she spoke only once that evening. Then she muttered something about being a sport, but the nurse did not get it.

She began to sink after that. The line on the chart on the nurse's desk outside began to drop at 9 o'clock; Anna's face was cold and pinched, and her hands were clammy. But she still held to the rosary; it was, in a sense, all she had to cling to.

She felt lonely, dying there like that, but she did not fool herself. She had deserved it. She had had Joe, and she had thrown him away. He hated her or he would be with her now. It had never entered her sick mind that Joe might not be able to come to her.

All she knew was that she wanted him and he was not there.

Toward midnight an interne came and gave her a hypodermic, and the touch of his strong hands roused her.

"Honest to God, Joe!" she muttered. "I only went —"

It looked then as though Anna, rosary and all, was going to die with a lie on her lips.

At midnight some Negroes passed along the street below. Their soft voices rose, plaintive, beseeching and sad:

"'Tain't my mother or my father,
But it's me, O Lord,
Standin' in the need of prayer.
It's me, it's me, it's me, O Lord,
An' I'm standin' in the need of prayer. . . ."

But Anna did not hear them.

So was Easter ushered into the Fifth Ward that night, with things as to Joe and Anna about as bad as they could be; with joy tempered with sorrow in the houses, the larders filled, the alarm clocks set for the early mass; with Father Murphy lying in his church in the candlelight, and a guard of honor to watch by him; and with Aaron the Jew, to whom it was not Easter Eve at all but Saturday night, sleepless in his bed and low in his mind.

And it is from Aaron the Jew that we must construct the rest of the story.

Briefly, Aaron says that he was lying in his bed, awake, and Father Murphy's bed was empty and neat and square beside him. Aaron was wideawake, and he cites the Negroes' singing as a proof of it:

"It's me, it's me, it's me, O Lord,
I'm standin' in the need of prayer."

Then, Aaron says, all at once there was the heavy fragrance of flowers in the air, such as filled the church that night, and mixed in with it was the

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odor of incense — although how Aaron recognized the incense it is not for us to know.

He sat up in his bed, and all was as it had been. The McNamara boy was snoring, and somebody down the ward rapped on his stand with his tin cup. Which everybody knows is a signal to the nurse outside for water.

So Aaron lay down again, and turned so he faced that empty bed in the dark corner. And the corner was not dark, nor was the bed empty.

Father Murphy was in the bed, just as if — well, just as if nothing had happened. Only he looked very peaceful and quiet, and his hands were crossed on his breast and held a crucifix. Aaron saw him plainly, because there was a Light.

"What sort of a light? Candles?"

"Well, maybe. I ain't sure. But there was a light, though. I seen it. But maybe it came from the star."

"What star?"

"The star he was always looking at," he explains patiently. "The one he called the Light of the World."

However all that may be, it is what followed that matters. For Aaron says that while he looked at him, Father Murphy sat up in his bed, and first he glanced out of the window and then he looked at Aaron and spoke.

"He is risen," he said, and looked at Aaron as if daring him to deny it. But Aaron did not. Instead he said in a trembling voice — and how the words came to him he does not know:

"He is risen indeed."

The father seemed to be relieved at that answer and was quiet for a moment or so, according to Aaron. Then he said:

"I have gone away and left my work undone, and my soul has no rest. Arise you, Aaron, and go to Anna Allison. Lay your hands on her wound and say to her that she must not die or evil will come of it."

"Now?" said Aaron, shaking.

"Now," said the father.

So Aaron got up and drew on his old hospital trousers — he had been promoted, as one may say, to trousers by that time — and stuck his feet in his slippers.

When he was ready to go he looked at the father again. He was still much as he had been, but not so clear to be seen. "Fading" is Aaron's word for it, and it is as good as any. And he spoke once more, but faintly now.

"Go to Joe also," he said, "and tell him that Anna —"

He never finished it, because just then the Negroes outside started to sing again:

"*My Lord, he calls me,*
He calls me by the thunder,
The trumpet sounds within — my soul."

And there was Aaron, standing in his trousers and slippers beside the bed in the corner and nothing in the bed at all.

Aaron felt very odd, like a man rudely awakened from a sleep — as of course he may have been. His first impulse was to go back to his couch and do nothing.

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"My knees were like water," he says, and adds: "And the bed was smooth, you know." He looks at one wistfully when he says this; it is to explain his moment of weakness.

But in the end he decided to go.

He had far more trouble than the two of them had had before. At one time he dodged into a closet and some pans fell down with a fearful crash; and again he only escaped the night watchman by getting out on a fire escape. But in the end he got to Anna's ward and slid inside.

He knew where to go well enough, but there was a woman awake and moving about in it and a nurse with Anna herself. It looked bad, and if the nurse had not gone out it might have been hopeless.

But she went out (it was to write "Pulse indistinguishable" on Anna's record, as a matter of fact) and so Aaron finally got in.

"Anna," he said. "Anna!"

She looked up at him, and once more she thought it was Joe.

"I'm glad you've come," she said in her half whisper. "I never blamed you. I —"

"Now see here, Anna," Aaron said in a businesslike tone. "You've gotta get well. Don't you know that?"

Well, she saw then that it was not Joe, and she turned sulky.

"I don't want to," she said. "Go away — and let me alone."

"All right," said Aaron, "if that's the way you feel about it. Let Joe hang. It's not my business."

"Hang?" said Anna. "What do you mean — hang? It's — my fault, isn't it?"

"The law should think of that!"

"But I told them —"

"Forget it," said Aaron. "They've got the goods on him. You better get well, and be quick about it."

Then some recollection seems to have come to him that he had twisted his message somewhat and forgotten a part of it. For he put his hands, awkwardly one may be sure, on her bandaged body for a minute.

"You get well, girl," he said. "You're all right, and we're for you, y'understand?"

And Anna nodded submissively, as if indeed she did.

Having thus completed, if somewhat crudely, his apostolic mission, Aaron went away again. Not far, however, for he was discovered outside the ward door, and the next morning, Easter, he was sent home. They brought him his clothes tied up in a wrinkled bundle and got from the office his $2.10 in money, and turned him out.

But he had saved Anna Allison, and through her he had saved Joe.

The ward let him alone that Easter Day, save for some little boys who threw stones at his window because it was Easter and Aaron was a Jew. And Aaron feebly swept up the broken glass and made no protest.

That afternoon, however, he pressed his clothes and ventured back to the hospital, feebly, as befitted his condition, but sturdily as befitted his purpose, to see Joe.

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"How're you feeling?" he asked. "Better? Well, that's all right."

He was filled with great thoughts, but in the unfriendly eyes of the surgical ward he stood awkward and uncomfortable.

"Treatin' you pretty good?"

But Joe did not answer. He was trying to say something. Aaron leaned down over the bed and studied his lips, and it was Aaron who understood.

"Anna?" he said. "Well, they're kinda tight down in the office, but I was talkin' by the doctor himself. She's better today. She's doin' good. You just forget it and get well."

Life goes on much as usual in the Fifth Ward. They still sell liquor in the shed behind the poolroom, and the new priest who has taken Father Murphy's place cannot stop it. And Anna still goes up and down Wheeler Street, her slim legs in silk stockings and her eyes glancing about for admiration.

Not at once do you change the Annas of the world.

But she no longer stops at the corners, a little flushed, a trifle daring, to talk to the men gathered there. The men are afraid, for one thing, and perhaps so is Anna. When Joe comes home at night she crawls on his lap, and Joe holds her there.

"Are you still crazy about me, Joe?"

"You bet I am," he says. But he has to free one hand to say it, for Joe still has to cover the end of his tube before he can speak.

The ward has never quite believed Aaron's story. Mostly they think he slept and dreamed it, for the guard of honor that night at the church says his reverence never moved during the night, and all was as it should be.

Only one man says different, and he speaks of a cold wind at midnight, but perhaps somebody had opened a door. But two things bear him out. The fever began to die that night and has not come back again; and there is the matter of O'Leary the policeman, last Easter Eve.

It was like this: O'Leary was gumshoeing down Walter's Alley when what should he hear but a strange sound from Aaron's shop, "Ladies' and Gents' Pressing and Repairing."

O'Leary stopped to listen, and there it was: *Tap-tap-tap.*

So O'Leary, who is a bold man, walked on his rubber heels to Aaron's shop and tried the door, and as it was open he went in. And what should be there but Aaron, curled up in the window place and tapping on the glass! Tap-tap-tap, tap-tap-tapping away for dear life.

It was dark in there, so Aaron never saw O'Leary until he was inside. And it was then that Aaron gave a sort of cry and stretched out his arms like a man who has waited long and hungrily.

"I knew you would come again, Father," he said, and dropped in a faint.

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A "tough" cop story with a heart as big as life . . .
in our **Black Mask** *department*

RIGHT IN THE HEART

by WILLIAM HOLDER

MORGAN SHUFFLED THE PAPERS until they were edged evenly, then clipped them together. There were a lot of them because it hadn't been a felony, actually. He said, "Well, that ties it up."

"I guess it does," Sheldon said. He felt numb, weak.

Morgan looked at him, then at his watch. He said, "Hell, it's after ten. Go on home. Call it a day."

Sheldon nodded wearily. "O.K., Lieutenant, I think I will."

Morgan got up, and his hand was heavy on Sheldon's shoulder. "Don't take it so tough. There isn't a grand jury alive that won't exonerate you. You've got nothing to worry about."

Sheldon wasn't worrying about the grand jury, although a lot of other cops in town were. The grand jury was a busy outfit these days, with the big police-bookmaker scandal filling the papers. But he wasn't thinking about what a grand jury would say. Maybe later he'd worry about that, but not now.

"Go home and have a couple of drinks," Morgan said. "Forget about it. How could you have known?"

Sheldon said, "Sure," and he was seeing again the face under the street light, feeling the shock again after the excitement during which he really hadn't felt anything.

He went through the precinct house and down the steps to the wet street and turned automatically toward the subway station, five blocks away.

He liked what the lieutenant had said. "Just forget about it." That was a sound bit of advice. But he knew he'd never forget about it.

If only I hadn't taken the last shot, he thought. The first two had been all right, up in the air and hurting no one and probably landing out in the river some place. But that third one. That was the one he'd never forget.

He got on the subway and was only vaguely aware of the other passengers. There were two of the usual Saturday night drunks and they weren't bothering anyone, just talking loudly to each other, but when they saw the uniform they lowered their voices and even that brought it back to him strongly again.

If only it wasn't such a tough neighborhood, it wouldn't have happened. That was stupid — like saying if he wasn't a cop it wouldn't have happened.

But it certainly wouldn't have

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happened if Brownie hadn't been shot in the belly a month ago in that liquor-store holdup, or if Samuels hadn't been shot at two weeks before when he'd walked up to a couple of guys looking over a parked Cadillac. Because after that everyone in the department got a little jumpy.

He got off at his station and walked to the house, and now he knew he'd been making the whole trip out of habit. He'd thought of Saturday night just because of the drunks, but he hadn't thought of Marie or that she was over at the Blanners', and that he was supposed to pick her up when he came off tour.

That was just what he needed tonight, a party. A bunch of people drinking and laughing and making a lot of noise.

He went into the house and up to the apartment and started changing his clothes. He was still thinking about it, hard, and he went to the living room and poured himself a drink, but none of it would go away. So he took it out and examined it to see if he could find where it had gone wrong.

He'd heard the first shot just before he turned the corner, and running then, he'd seen the gathering knot of figures and the little bald guy with the gun, and then he had drawn his own before he recognized him as the man who owned the dry-goods store.

There had been the confused shouting, and the glimpse of the running man, and the owner of the store had shot again, then had seen Sheldon. His voice had been hoarse with anger and fear. "A holdup! That guy" — pointing — "he came walking right in with a gun and . . ."

But then Sheldon had been running, the other figure almost a block ahead of him in the night street, and he had shouted and shot twice into the air. A man and a woman got off the sidewalk and huddled in a doorway, and the holdup guy had stopped then, and turned, one hand going to his pocket. Sheldon tried again to believe.

Sheldon had slid to a stop, had held the right arm out straight, had shot once for the middle of the body. The figure ahead of him had taken one step and had fallen.

He killed his drink and refused for a little while to think about the rest of it. He finished dressing, keeping the miserable, dirty part of it out of his mind for a time at least, and then walked the two blocks to the Blanners' . . .

It was a noisy crowd. Jerry Blanner gave him a big hello when he came in and then went to the kitchen to get him a drink. Sheldon stood near the foyer and saw Marie across the room.

He walked over and she said, "How's my cop?"

"Ragged," he said.

Jerry Blanner came back with the drink and they kidded for a couple of minutes, then Dot Blanner walked over and nodded at Jerry. "Look at him. Loaded. It's *my* birthday, but he . . ."

It was nice warm kidding and it

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took some of the freeze out of Sheldon. There was music on the radio, and when Marie got up and held out her arms he set down his drink and danced with her in the limited space, somehow regaining strength and assurance from the light pressure of this loved and familiar body.

She said, "What's wrong, Joe?"

It wasn't the place to tell her, and he shook his head. "Nothing, kid."

"You're a liar. Later?"

"Yeah," he said. "Later."

In a half hour he was starting to relax, the drinks and Marie warming him, loosening him. The whole thing was beginning to come into perspective. It was still bad, but he could see just how and why it had happened.

Marie was across the room, talking to the Bergs, and Sheldon leaned against a wall.

"Where's the TV set?" someone said, and Sheldon turned. The man was tall, dark, a bit drunk. He was grinning. Sheldon didn't know him.

Sheldon said, "What?"

"The TV set," the man said again. "Blanner said you're a cop. Where's the TV set? You mean you don't know any rich bookies? All cops are supposed to have them. TV sets or new cars. It's a joke, son."

Jerry Blanner came over just then. He said to Sheldon, "Joe, I don't think you know Harry Hayes. Harry, this is Joe Sheldon."

"The guy told me you was a cop," the man said. He wasn't weaving, but he'd had plenty. "How come you aren't in Mexico, this time of year? I hear every smart cop is taking a vacation in Mexico, around now."

Sheldon felt his belly tightening, and Jerry Blanner said, "Harry, wait a minute. Harry, come over here and . . ."

"I'm disappointed," the man said. "No TV set."

Sheldon looked at the grinning, loosened mouth, but what he saw actually was the woman crying. He wouldn't get rid of that for a while.

He started to turn away from the man, then he came back. "Sure, I'm a cop. And no TV set." He felt the silence growing in the room and he was aware of Marie coming over toward him. "Never had one," he said. "Don't expect to get one for a hell of a while."

The man stayed with it. "Well, how about Mexico, then?"

"No Mexico," Sheldon said. He knew he was being stupid but he had to say the rest of it. "Too busy. I'm just a cop. A patrolman." He was wound up, now. "So I can't go to Mexico right now."

Beside him Marie said, "Joe."

He looked at her and nodded. "All right. I just want to tell this man why I haven't got a TV set." He said to the man, "I walk around all day, and I'm very busy. I put parking tickets on cars, and sometimes I stand at school crossings and slow the traffic down a little. Sometimes I run in a tough drunk, and I spend a lot of time checking doors at night.

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You know, the doors on tailor shops and grocery stores. Like that."

The whole room was listening to him now, and the slack grin had gone from the man's face. Marie touched his arm but he kept talking. "I went to law school at night for three years, to finish, just so I'd know what I was doing on my job and figuring that it would help me later on. But I didn't need to be any lawyer two weeks ago when another cop and I went into a black cellar after a guy who had just killed his wife with a meat cleaver. And he still had the cleaver."

He took Marie's cigarette from her hand. He said, "And for this I get thirty-five hundred dollars a year. It sounds like almost seventy bucks a week, but it isn't when you take out this and that. I have to buy my own uniforms and they're not cheap. Overcoats, raincoats, stuff like that. Even the gun. I even have to buy the gun. You'd figure they'd give you that, but they don't."

He took a long draw on the cigarette. "I'm not kicking about it, understand? Things are tough all over. But I never took a dollar from anyone. Maybe I'm stupid. But not even a tip. You get the idea?"

The man said, "Hell, Mac, I . . ."

"I know. You were just kidding. So everything is fine and we'll forget about it. Right?" There was no sound in the room. He'd finished and now he felt only embarrassment.

Jerry Blanner said, "Joe, how about a drink? Come on in here a minute."

"Sure," Sheldon said. "I'd like one." He followed Jerry into the kitchen, and the noise in the other room suddenly started to pick up. He watched Jerry pour the drink and he said, "I'm sorry I blew my top, Jerry. I had a lousy day."

Jerry said, "Sure, kid. I know."

And when he'd finished the drink Marie was ready, her hat and coat on, and they said the awkward goodbyes. The man named Hayes was sitting on a sofa with a large blonde woman.

On the street, Marie's arm was in his and he could feel the soft pressure. She said, "Joe, what's the matter?"

"I had a tough day."

"I know," she said. "But what was it?"

"I had to kill somebody."

The increased pressure on his arm was understanding and love. She said softly, "Oh, Joe!"

He was remembering the stout, poorly dressed woman and the handsome face that had looked upon much trouble and had accepted it. He could smell the precinct house and hear the sound of her voice. "He wasn't a bad boy. Real big for his age and maybe a touch wild because he was gettin' in with the older ones too soon. He'd play hookey every now and then and maybe he'd do things like this just to be smart. But not bad."

Then she had looked at him and had shaken her head. "I'm not blaming you, Mr. Policeman." She had looked down at the old, used floor.

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"But it's a terrible, terrible shame." And she had begun to cry quietly.

"It was a robbery," Sheldon told his wife now. "A little dry-goods store owned by a man named Barton. I came along just as Barton was taking a shot at this guy. I chased him and fired two in the air, then the thief stopped and I thought he was going for the gun Barton told me he had. So I shot him. It was dark but a doctor couldn't have put it into his heart any better on an operating table. I couldn't get off a shot like that on a pistol range in fourteen years, but I did it tonight. Right in the heart."

Marie said nothing. She held tight to his arm.

"You know what he'd stolen?" Sheldon asked. "Two dozen socks. A little bundle worth maybe five, six dollars. You know what kind of a gun he had? Some little Hopalong Cassidy job that cost a quarter. But that didn't frighten old Dead-Shot Sheldon. Right in the heart at a good thirty, forty yards."

They were walking slowly and Marie had his hand in both of hers, now.

"You know how old he was?" Sheldon said. "This big, tough holdup guy? Fourteen years old. *Fourteen years old.*" He had to force the words out. "Two dozen socks."

Marie said softly, "Joe! Oh, my poor Joey!"

Sheldon said, "And his mother wasn't even angry with me."

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THE PAST . . .

The next three stories in this issue — by Miriam Allen deFord, Phyllis Bentley, and Matthew Gant — have two things in common. First, they are all prize-winning stories from last year's contest; second, they serve as the three angles of an unusual 'tec triangle. One angle stands for Crime, the second for Detection, and the third for Mystery — the great triumvirate of 'tec types; and the Crime angle deals with the past, the Detection angle with the present, and the Mystery angle with the future. Thus, in a triple entry, you will have the opportunity to view the Past, the Present, and the Future in terms of the three basic forms of the genre.

Miriam Allen deFord's story delves deep into the past — back to the city of Nippur in the year 1850 B.C. — 3800 years ago! The story is based on a famous real-life case which was cited many times in later trials. Miss deFord first saw an allusion to the case in a newspaper. She wrote to the professor at the University of Pennsylvania who had once been in charge of archeological researches at Nippur, and asked for more information about the ancient murder case. The professor very kindly sent Miss deFord a reprint of some papers on the subject, one of which gave the translation of the cuneiform tablet which, while mutilated and incomplete, represented the 1850 B.C. record of the court trial. It should be borne in mind that, like the ancient Greeks in Roman times, the Sumerians of Nippur, although conquered politically, still set the cultural standards of their day; hence, their recording on cuneiform of such important events as murder trials.

Miss deFord then went on to read everything she could find on the Sumerians. For dramatic purposes, she made many changes in the original case, simplifying as well as adding to the facts, and she is quite sure there are no serious errors in her story.

So, now, look deep into the past . . .

THE JUDGMENT OF EN-LIL

by MIRIAM ALLEN deFORD

IT IS 2500 YEARS NOW SINCE NIPPUR, that great city on the banks of the old course of the Euphrates, pulsed with life. Its men and women are dust, even as its streets and dwellings . . .

Lu-inanna, chief accountant of the temple of the great god En-lil, sat in

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an upper room of his home, and quarreled bitterly with his wife, Nin-dada.

"I know well," said Lu-inanna coldly, "that for ten years you have resented it that your father married you to me. You have not hidden it, my dear wife. I am quite well aware that you are an aristocrat, an *amelu*, and that I am a mere *mushkinu*, a civil servant — though even you must acknowledge that I am a pretty important one by now. . . . Say something, you!" he thundered suddenly.

Nin-dada bowed her head in silence. It was her only answer. If she had looked him in the face, he would have seen the contempt and loathing in her eyes.

Lu-inanna stood up abruptly and began pacing the arched balcony looking down on the lobby of his big new brick house. It was night, but the slaves had lit the lamps. From the stool where she sat, Nin-dada watched him. He drew a deep breath and confronted her again.

"You have given me no sons, you have not so much as given me a daughter." His voice was quieter now, under control. "You, you are a *patesi's* daughter, as you're so fond of reminding me; your father was governor of Nippur. You know the law. What is to be done with a barren woman?"

"She may be divorced," said Nin-dada calmly.

"Precisely. And what is to be done with a woman whose husband is hateful to her, who says to him, 'You are not my husband'?"

"She may be thrown into the river to drown. But I have never said that."

"Not in words. But you could have said it in words, and still you would have been safe. I am not a fool, Nin-dada, even though you treat me as one. It may amuse you to have me say so, but my position depends on my reputation. A breath of scandal could demote me; the chief accountant of the temple must not be a man who has had to divorce his wife, still less one who has had to hand her over for execution."

"I am not a fool either. I have known that, and I have not been afraid."

"Afraid? Have you ever been afraid of anything? I might have liked you better if you had ever shown that much human feeling. No, you have taken advantage of my disadvantage. More, you have known that it isn't only that I must keep my name unspotted because of my post in the government. You have known all about my difficulties with Nanna-sig; you know that every day I have fixed on me the eyes of an assistant who wants my place, who is jealous of me and detests me because I am in his way. That means that I must be doubly careful."

"And what is all this leading up to?"

Lu-inanna sat down wearily. His hand pressed his throbbing forehead.

"I wish I could talk to you as one human being to another," he said tiredly. "Look, Nin-dada, I am no longer young. I want to see my son before I die. . . . I am going to take a concubine, a young woman who will bear me children."

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Nin-dada repressed the retort that rose to her lips: And what if the concubine does not? What if it is you who are at fault? There were things that even a free Sumerian woman, even a great lady married to a commoner, could not say with impunity. Instead, she answered coolly: "Why tell me? I can't prevent you. Or did you want me to give you one of my own family slaves?"

"So that after the poor creature had been freed by bearing my child you could cast her back into slavery again, or throw her out altogether? No, my dear, I wouldn't expose even a slave-girl to the kind of persecution you would delight in inflicting on her. I have made my own choice, so you can do nothing to harm the girl."

He paused, quite certain that Nin-dada would not deign to voice the malicious curiosity he was sure possessed her. He was right. She stood up, her flounced skirt rustling around her, and patted away a small yawn.

"You are the master. If you have no more to tell me, I think I shall call my maid and go to bed. It is late, and tomorrow morning you must go to Drehem for the monthly inventory."

"How well you remember my duties," he smiled satirically. "No, I have a bit more to say. I am getting three kinds of satisfaction out of this project, my dear wife. I have chosen a girl to whom I am attracted very much; after all, you know, I am a man, with the feelings of a man. Then I have chosen one whom you yourself, I regret to say, dislike and will be very reluctant to see emancipated when our first child is born — to say nothing of how much you will dislike having to share my estate with my children instead of inheriting it all yourself. And I have chosen a girl whom I bought — shall I say by blackmail? Nanna-sig was in no position to say no when his superior in office liked the looks of one of his servants. He will be very much annoyed when she becomes my concubine — but there won't be a thing he can do about it. He deserves some punishment for all the irritation he causes me daily."

Against her will, Nin-dada felt herself flushing with anger.

"Gim-nunsina!" she exclaimed harshly.

"Exactly. Gim-nunsina. The girl you hate to have around the house because she is so young and so pretty and so sweet-tempered, and because I bought her and brought her home without even consulting the lady mistress. I might add, by the way, that I haven't told her yet of the honor that is coming to her. I plan to do that when I get back from Drehem the day after tomorrow. You are free to break the good news to her while I'm gone, if you wish, but I rather guess you won't. And just in case —" he added softly — "you should have any other ideas, my dear wife, if I come back and find that anything unpleasant has happened to Gim-nunsina, you will be very sorry indeed."

"Nothing will happen to your pet," said Nin-dada through clenched white teeth. "Good night, my lord."

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She turned on her heel and vanished into her bedroom.

Generations had passed since the Sumerians — that proud, long-headed, dark-haired race who had brought from their ancestral mountains their agglutinative tongue and their god of rain and wind, En-lil — had been the real rulers of their city Nippur, or of any other of their city-states in the valley between the Tigris and the Euphrates. The Elamites and then the Babylonians had overwhelmed and conquered them. But the conquered had imposed on the victors their own culture and their own religion. Their law, their cuneiform writing and its literature, their speech, remained the law, the writing, and the speech of civilization — and would continue to be for 500 years after the last Sumerian was dead. Nippur was still the holy city, seat of the god En-lil and his pantheon; the huge district of the scribes testified to the number of the servants of his temple — the teachers, historians, civil employees, physicians, architects, secretaries, accountants, who were all classed as scribes and made up the secular staff of the aristocratic priests and the sacred prostitutes. All Mesopotamia paid tribute to the temple of En-lil — so much so that the vast farm at Drehem, not far from Nippur, was the receiving station for the immensity of offerings in cattle, sheep, pigs, and goats — in barley, onions, grapes, and dates — in wine, beer, and cheese, in wool and flax. With the trade-goods of Egypt and Persia — the gold, silver, and copper; the alabaster, lapis lazuli, carnelian, and mother-of-pearl — all this made the temple of En-lil rich beyond belief.

The foodstuffs, however, did have to be estimated in detail — that was the task of the temple's chief accountant. It was one of the most important duties of the post that Lu-inanna held and that Nanna-sig assisted him in, and coveted. Early in the morning Nin-dada watched her husband, with only a single slave to carry his equipment and luggage, start on his monthly trip of inspection and inventory at Drehem. She watched him from the upper balcony of the two-story house; they had exchanged no word since she had turned and left him the night before.

He had been gone for an hour when she sent for Gim-nunsina.

Yes, the girl had a sort of flamboyant prettiness, she thought scornfully — the sort that would attract the eye of an undiscriminating man. Nin-dada had a disagreeable vision of Gim-nunsina elevated to freedom — never, of course, on a level with her former mistress but always in evidence, flaunting herself as the mother of the master's child. Well, that must not happen, if Nin-dada could prevent it; and she could.

"You sent for me, lady?" said Gim-nunsina, her eyes cast down, as was proper. Nin-dada gave her a suspicious look; was there a shade of impudence in that soft, polite voice? But her own voice was bland.

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"You are to carry a message for me," she ordered. "You are to go to the temple and ask to see your old master, Nanna-sig."

For an instant Gim-nunsina's lowered eyes looked up, then were lowered again. Surprised? Startled? Puzzled? Yes, it was an errand, usually, for a male slave; but even in her plans to use Nanna-sig, Nin-dada could not resist reminding him of his humiliation when he had been obliged from diplomacy to sell to his chief one of the most desirable of his own servants. Indeed, it was good common-sense to remind him, to stir up again his resentment against Lu-inanna.

Nin-dada went on imperturbably. "You are to tell him that I wish to speak to him, as soon as he can find the time to come. If he can return with you, so much the better. It is a matter of importance."

"I go, lady," murmured the girl.

Nin-dada did not see her return, but it was not half an hour before another slave ushered Nanna-sig into the ground-floor reception room. She was there already, waiting for him; she had known self-interest, if no more, would bring him at her bidding, though they had met only two or three times in the four years he had been Lu-inanna's first-assistant. She watched the handsome young man cross the lobby toward her, and she smiled.

"You are good to come to me, Nanna-sig," she said graciously. "I could have gone to you at the *ziggurat*, but people might have asked why. It is a small matter, but it is confidential."

"Anything I can do, Lady Nin-dada —"

"It is only that nearly two hours ago my husband left for Drehem, and after he had gone I discovered that he had left his official seal behind him. Without it he will not be able to certify the lists. If you could follow after him and give it to him —"

Nanna-sig colored angrily.

"Surely," he said haughtily, "that is an errand which any of your household staff could have done for you."

Nin-dada looked him straight in the eyes, holding his gaze.

"It is a lie," she said softly and clearly. "He has his seal, of course. What he left behind him was — this."

She reached swiftly behind her to the low table and on her outstretched palm there lay a knife — a sharp, thin knife with a chased silver handle.

"It is a lonely road to Drehem in the heat of the day," she murmured. "A swift horse could easily overtake a traveler."

Nanna-sig's face was white.

"He will not be alone," he said harshly.

"He has only one slave with him. The slave is mounted on a slow ass and he is not armed. Lu-inanna is not armed, either."

Nanna-sig swallowed hard.

"I should denounce you to the high priest," he said roughly, but his voice shook.

"If you did," she replied quietly, "it would be your word against that

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of the daughter of a former *patesi* of Nippur. You would be cast out and disgraced. Just as I should be disbelieved if I should ever make false accusations against — the new chief accountant of the temple."

Nanna-sig put out his hand and took the knife.

It was almost dark when he came again, unannounced. Nin-dada had been keeping watch on the door for hours, from the small private chapel at the side of the lobby. She went out swiftly and beckoned him in.

Before the altar of En-lil she said, "I was at my prayers. Did you wish to see me, Nanna-sig?"

"Not here," he said nervously.

"Here I am never disturbed."

He drew from his belt an object wrapped in a cloth.

"Here is your knife," he muttered.

"What knife? I have lost no knife." But she took it.

"It is done."

"What is done? You speak in riddles. Nothing has happened. Go home, Nanna-sig."

He looked at her with a strange expression, turned, and left.

Within an hour a passing peasant found the two inert bodies beside the road. The ass was cropping weeds nearby. The horse had run away.

The peasant was frightened at the sight of a corpse with its throat cut, and the blood-covered clothing that showed the dead man must have been a gentleman, perhaps an official. He dared not report his find, lest he himself be accused of the crime. He hurried away.

No one else passed the place until morning. Nanna-sig had trailed his victim to a secluded and unfrequented spot. Then a physician, riding with his retinue to visit a patient, an official at Drehem, discovered the two men lying by the road.

Nanna-sig had bungled. Lu-inanna had long since bled to death. But the slave was still alive. He was dying, but he was conscious. As Zi-usuddu, the physician, stooped over him, he said distinctly: "Nanna-sig killed my master." Then the slave also died.

The case was brought at once before Ur-Ninurta the king, in his capital at Isin. As was his royal prerogative, he turned it over for judgment within a day to the Nippur assembly, acting as a court of justice. They met immediately.

Nanna-sig, in chains, stood before the assembly, and men bore witness against him, swearing in the name of the king. Zi-usuddu the physician told his story, and though his slaves who had been with him could not be witnesses, through the prosecutors they told what they too had heard the dying man say. Then Nanna-sig himself was permitted to speak.

"I hated him and I killed him," he said loudly. "I am guilty and I must die. But there is one who should die with me." He paused, then went on tensely. "What I did, I did at the instance of the dead man's wife. She

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sent for me by a slave whom I had sold to Lu-inanna, and I went to her house. She gave me a knife and told me that her husband was on his way to Drehem and that a swift horse could overtake him. I listened, for with Lu-inanna dead I would have his post, and I had long been tormented beyond patience with waiting for it.

"It was the judgment of En-lil that in my haste I did not see to it that the slave died too. The god found me out in my sin, and I must die before Lu-inanna's chair. But the woman Nin-dada is the true murderer of her husband, and she should die as well!"

When they came for Nin-dada she went in great calm, in a robe of white linen, and with her maids following her. She ordered Gim-nunsina to be among them.

"Will you speak for yourself or will you have one of us to defend you?" Ti-rigan, the *dikud*, one of the judges who spoke for the assembly, asked her.

"I will speak for myself," she said. She looked with contempt at Nanna-sig's white face.

They told her what he had said. She laughed shortly.

"He is a liar as well as a murderer," she answered. "He hated my poor husband, who stood in the way of his ambition; everyone in the temple knows that."

There was a murmur of assent in the throng.

"Since he has been caught by his own stupidity," she went on sternly, "he would have his last act a further satisfaction of his hatred. He has twisted a simple matter to try to involve me in his crime.

"It is true that I sent for him to come to me. I had discovered that my husband had left for Drehem and had forgotten his cylinder seal, without which he could not certify his inventory lists. I could have sent it after him by one of our servants, but in the goodness of my heart I gave Nanna-sig an opportunity to do his chief a favor, and thus to earn his kindness — for I knew that my husband was displeased with him and aware of his jealousy."

"It was a knife you gave me!" cried Nanna-sig. "You admitted to me that the story of the seal was subterfuge."

"You see?" said Nin-dada. "Even now he confesses I spoke to him of the seal. He is an ingrate and a liar; I did not know a man could so repay a generous thought, or would dare to perjure himself in the very presence of the gods. For he came again in the evening, when I was at my prayers in our private chapel. Before the altar, beneath the statuettes of the gods, he told me he had given Lu-inanna the seal, that my husband had thanked him and was pleased. Then Nanna-sig thanked me in turn for having given him the chance to ingratiate himself, and he said goodbye to me and left my house."

"You lie!" shouted Nanna-sig.

Nin-dada smiled and continued. "I am the daughter of a former *patesi* of this city, the youngest daughter of Ur-bau whom many of you here remember. The first thing I was taught

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as a child was that an *amelu* does not lie. Judge me by my words, and judge Nanna-sig by his. Then act toward us both according to your wisdom, and according to the judgment of En-lil."

Nanna-sig jumped to his feet again. He was pulled down. "You have spoken: no more from you!" Ti-rigan commanded.

Nanna-sig lifted his chained hands to his face and wept into them bitterly.

Nin-dada paid no heed to the buzz as the men of the assembly debated among themselves. She was watching Gim-nunsina, half hidden in the train of attendants. The girl's pretty face was distorted; tears were running down her cheeks. Ah, my girl, Nin-dada thought with an inward smile, so you did guess what a great honor was to be yours? And now it is lost forever, thanks to that man over there who was once your master. No wonder you weep! It will be a hard service for you, now that I am the heir to all that Lu-inanna owned.

The debate came to a close. The members of the assembly resumed their places. The *diduk* arose to announce the verdict.

"Nanna-sig, formerly assistant to the chief accountant of the temple, is to be taken to the house of the late Lu-inanna, in the district of the scribes, and there before the sun sets he is to be strangled before Lu-inanna's chair, for the murder which he committed.

"The lady Nin-dada is free."

Nin-dada watched impassively while, slowly and horribly, Nanna-sig died before Lu-inanna's high-backed ceremonial chair of wood inlaid with silver. Within, Lu-inanna's body lay in state in the reception room, on a bier stretched out on the matting which covered the floor. The widow wailed aloud, as the chief mourner, when the next day they laid him in the brick vault built beneath the house to hold the bodies of the family dead.

After the funeral, her women came around her to console her, as was the custom, but she waved them away. They left, murmuring compassionately, and she drew the curtains and lay down upon her bed. After a while she slept.

She opened her eyes, feeling other eyes on her. Gim-nunsina stood silently at the foot of the wooden bedstead.

"What do you want, girl?" said Nin-dada sharply. "I told you all to go. I wish to be alone at this dreadful time."

Gim-nunsina's eyelids were swollen, but her voice was firm.

"It is a dreadful time for me too, Lady Nin-dada," she said.

Nin-dada sat upright at the insolence in the slave-girl's tone.

"What do you mean?" she cried, outraged. "Are you, a slave, comparing your mourning for a dead master with the grief of his wife, his widow? Or have you, perhaps, also been on trial for your life, at the very moment of your bereavement? I am willing to

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make allowances at such a time as this, but leave me instantly or I shall send for the steward and have you well beaten."

"I shall not leave," said Gim-nunsina steadily. "You may have me whipped afterwards if you wish."

Nin-dada stared at her, too astonished to speak. An uneasy thrill of fear pierced her heart. Could the girl possibly have overheard Lu-inanna when he told his intentions for her? Or, far worse, could she have eavesdropped at Nin-dada's first talk with Nanna-sig?

"True, I have not been on trial for my life," she heard the girl continue resolutely. "And I am not grieving at all for my master, more than any slave should mourn when a good master dies."

"What, then, idiot?" Nin-dada found her voice at last.

"You sent me to bring Nanna-sig to you from the temple. I don't know what passed between you when he came, whether it was what he reported or what you told the assembly. But he went from you straight to the deed that ended in his disaster. And you sent *me* to give him the message. By your order I became the agent through whom Nanna-sig died."

"Nanna-sig?" Nin-dada stared at her incredulously.

"A slave has no choice, lady. A slave is bought and sold, and has no choice. But a slave is also a human being. Lu-inanna bought me from Nanna-sig, and I had to go. But my heart did not leave him. . . . I have loved Nanna-sig since we were small children together."

Nin-dada began to laugh, and could not stop.

"You fool!" she cried, sobbing with laughter. "So your poor little heart is broken because you loved Nanna-sig and by some far-fetched nonsense you blame yourself for his death. Do you want to know what you *really* lost by that man's murder of your master? I'll tell you, now that it can never be. When Lu-inanna came back from Drehem he was going to make you his concubine, so that you could bear his children and be freed and have your brats by him share his wealth after he died. . . . Now you have something really to weep for. No such luck will ever come your way again."

Gim-nunsina's black eyes glittered.

"I thank you, lady," she whispered. "I thank you for telling me what I did not have to endure. No, I don't blame myself that Nanna-sig died in his lovely youth. I blame the one whose command I had to obey — who planned her own husband's murder and then delivered Nanna-sig over to death to save herself!"

Nin-dada opened her mouth to scream for help. The girl was stronger and quicker than she. A hand closed her mouth — and then she saw the other hand.

"*This* is the judgment of En-lil!" cried the triumphant voice of Gim-nunsina.

Nin-dada had just time before she died to realize that it was the same knife.

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THE PRESENT . . .

One of the finest reprints we published in 1952 was Phyllis Bentley's "Author in Search of a Character," in our December 1952 issue. This story, by one of England's foremost regional novelists, was a tale of pure detection in the classic tradition. At that time we thought it was the only story about Miss Phipps, spinster-sleuth, that Phyllis Bentley had written — you will recall we said: "Meet Miss Phipps . . . who by her solo flight of deduction has earned permanent membership in the Club of Armchair Criminologists."

Well, imagine our surprise and delight when Phyllis Bentley got in touch with us and told us there were other stories about Miss Phipps! We promptly sent for them and promptly bought them — a series of five utterly charming adventures in crime, detection, and mystery. It was our intention to begin the series in this issue — but again the unexpected occurred. Imagine our surprise and delight when Phyllis Bentley wrote a brand-new story about her spinster-sleuth and submitted it to EQMM's Ninth Annual Contest!

So, first we give you Phyllis Bentley's prize-winning story, "Chain of Witnesses," and two months from now we shall start the series of tales about Miss Phipps. "Chain of Witnesses" is a tale of detection in today's England — the contemporary corner in our 'tec triangle. It is a realistic picture of British middle-class, British working people, and British hired help — with all the beautiful contrast in their speech patterns. It is a homey, unpretentious story about kindly folk — always excepting, of course, the murderer!

CHAIN OF WITNESSES

by PHYLLIS BENTLEY

I THOUGHT WE WERE TO KILL THE fatted calf tonight, Ruth, to welcome your Aunt Marian to Yelbeck," said Michael Dyer, serving out the cold ham. "Roast fowl and all the trimmings, what? Our daily help here for extra time and so on. Did something go wrong?"

"Our dear Mrs. Hoyle — she's our daily help — found she couldn't come tonight after all, so I postponed the bird till tomorrow. I hope you don't

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mind, Aunt Marian," said Ruth anxiously. "But Mrs. Hoyle is such a pet, you see — she was upset at the thought of me coping with a lot of cooking and washing-up all by myself. She actually rang up last night to let me know she couldn't come."

"Mrs. Hoyle is the comfort, support, and stay of this household — and don't make any mistake about it," said Michael with emphasis.

"I like Mrs. Hoyle," announced his small son Stephen staunchly (allowed to sit up late as a treat).

"I don't mind in the least, my dear," said Miss Phipps with a smile, replying to Ruth. "The more so since I believe the incident has given me an idea for a story."

"I keep forgetting you're a celebrated novelist, Aunt Marian," said Michael cheerfully. "You seem so normal, somehow."

"Really, Michael!" said his wife, laughing.

"I know what he means," said Miss Phipps. "I assure you, my dear, my withers are quite unwrung."

Mrs. Hoyle, plump, sturdy, graying, enveloped in a highly colored flowery coverall, was leaning over her kitchen table engrossed in the front page of Thursday's *Laire Post*— Laire was the city of which Yelbeck was a small suburb.

"Well, there!" said Mrs. Hoyle, raising herself on her huge round arms. "To think of you finding me wasting time like this, Miss Phipps! I'm right ashamed. But I was just reading about yesterday's awful murder. Seems to bring it home, like, happening at Yelbeck Junction."

Her eyes, which usually twinkled with glee even in the most adverse circumstances, were now solemn.

"What murder is that?" Miss Phipps, whose august and metropolitan morning paper had given no space to news about Yelbeck, conceded to Mrs. Hoyle the first choice of topic.

"It's poor Tom, the stationmaster at Yelbeck Junction. Or the porter, or the ticket-collector — I don't know which — he's all the lot, I reckon. You'll have seen him, Miss Phipps, I'm sure: a lame man with a stick — lamed in the first World War — a very kind, homely, helpful sort of body he was, always bustling about, up and down between the high level and low level platforms, helping people into trains and telling them about their connections and how they'd plenty of time for a cup of tea. Don't you remember him, Miss Phipps?"

This vivid portrait recalled Tom to Miss Phipps' mind very clearly. (She herself had been almost shepherded into the tearoom on more than one occasion.) "I do, indeed," she said. "I remember now I didn't see him last night when I arrived."

"He was dead," said Mrs. Hoyle portentously. "They found him at the foot of the steps between the levels, about half-past 5, with his neck broken."

"Dear me! How did he come to slip?" inquired Miss Phipps. "Ah, he was lame, of course."

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"He didn't. He was pushed," said Mrs. Hoyle.

"Does it say so in the paper?" asked Miss Phipps, curious. Drawing her pince-nez to the end of the thin gold chain which moored them to her bosom and perching them askew on her inquisitive nose, she bent over the *Laire Post*.

"It says that suspicion of foul play cannot be altogether ruled out," said Mrs. Hoyle, pointing to the words with a plump forefinger.

The position of the body on its back — walking-stick lying on top of the body as if thrown down later — bruise on temple — cup of tea he was carrying untouched on the ledge by the landing between two steps, read Miss Phipps, skipping down the column with a practised eye.

"Who would want to murder poor Tom, though? And why?" mourned Mrs. Hoyle. "Of course, I daresay you, Miss Phipps, writing detective stories like you do, can understand all about it at once."

"Well," began Miss Phipps, thus challenged, "let me see now."

She rapidly visualized the ill-lit, draughty, and howling desolation which was Yelbeck Junction, the product of competing railway companies in the Nineteenth Century. The lines on the lower level came from the north and east to Laire and those on the upper level approached a different Laire station from the south and west — so that changing trains at Yelbeck and hurrying up or down the long flights of stairs, to catch a connection on the other line, was a process well known to all Northshire travelers. The hill from Laire to Yelbeck was quite steep, so that engines thudded and plodded up the slope. Accordingly, some trains paused at Yelbeck to shed their mails; some flew past the platform arrogantly; some passed through the station without stopping, but with a slowness exasperating to passengers, who yearned to board them; and all this took place simultaneously on two different levels and in four different directions. The result was a set of maddening railway activities — perfectly orderly and comprehensible, like the universe, when one understood the laws which governed them, but highly confusing to the uninitiated eye.

Miss Phipps coughed in embarrassment, struggled with her vanity and won.

"No, I'm afraid I can't guess the reason for the murder of poor Tom," she admitted honestly. "However, that isn't what I wanted to talk to you about."

"No, we did ought both to be getting on with our work, that's right," said Mrs. Hoyle, coloring a little. "It isn't like me to be standing talking like this first thing in the morning, I do assure you, Miss Phipps."

"I know that, Mrs. Hoyle," said Miss Phipps. "You are the comfort, support, and stay of this household, as Mr. Dyer was saying only last night at supper."

Mrs. Hoyle lowered her eyes, embarrassed.

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"He's a young gentleman as likes his joke," she said. "Not but what he works hard too. Few people, as I often say to Mr. Hoyle, works harder nor what young Mr. Dyer does, bringing ledgers home at night and that, though things don't ever seem to turn out for him quite as he hopes. And Mrs. Dyer as well! They're a fine young couple and the little ones is lovely. I was right sorry to have to disoblige Mrs. Dyer last night after I'd given my promise like, but I couldn't help it."

"Mrs. Hoyle," said Miss Phipps, putting her hands on the kitchen table and leaning forward impressively, "*why* couldn't you help it?"

Mrs. Hoyle gazed at her dumfounded.

"Don't be alarmed — and please believe I'm not in the least questioning the validity of your reason. In this complex modern world of ours, Mrs. Hoyle," said Miss Phipps, thinking aloud, "the lives of all of us are very subtly and intricately interwoven. Our every action, however simple, has far-reaching consequences in the cosmic pattern."

"Of course I'm not one for much book-learning," murmured Mrs. Hoyle in anguish.

"But you would help me in the planning of a story, wouldn't you?" pleaded Miss Phipps. "Any story I conceived while visiting my niece I should regard as her property — a little gift," said Miss Phipps modestly, "instead of flowers or chocolates, you know, to one's hostess."

"Ah," began Mrs. Hoyle, brightening.

"And I need your help. To pursue a chain of cause and effect from end to end — if indeed it has an end," chanted Miss Phipps enthusiastically, "surely that is one of the primary functions of the novelist."

Mrs. Hoyle's brow darkened again to perplexity.

"To follow the results of one person's change of plan — through what diverse social and psychological strata would it not lead one! And here we have an example; a ripple which we can trace back from a point on the perimeter to its central impulse — a link at one end of a long causal chain."

Mrs. Hoyle continued to look flustered.

"Why, Mrs. Hoyle," concluded Miss Phipps, beaming, "*why* were you not able to come here last night though you had expected to do so? What alteration in your scheme of life had caused your change of plan? Did someone in your family group change *their* arrangements?"

"Oh, now I see what you mean!" exclaimed Mrs. Hoyle with immense relief. "Now isn't that clever? Yes, it was our Ted — my eldest grandson. You see," said Mrs. Hoyle in a confidential tone, "he'd been having a bit of trouble with his wife, had our Ted. She's having her first, you see, and she isn't settling down to it. Taken against Ted, she had. Poor Ted was right upset. So Ted, he wanted me to have a bit of a talk with her. But

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don't let's make it obvious, grandma, he says, or Carol will switch right off. I'll take you and Carol to this circus that's here this week, he says, and then you can stop in at our place for a bit of supper after, and I'll go out for some beer and you can have a bit of woman's talk together, see? So that's how it was, you see; we all went to the circus last night."

Miss Phipps, torn between respect for Ted's concern for his young wife and alarm at the exposure of Carol to the hazards of the circus, was somewhat at a loss.

"Was the circus — er — exciting?" she queried.

"Eh, it was lovely!" beamed Mrs. Hoyle. "And if there were anything a bit frightening, you know, lions and such, the way Carol snuggled up to Ted was lovely. I had a bit of a talk with her after, like Ted had said, but bless you, it wasn't needed. Them acrobats on the high wire had done the trick. She's a good girl really, is Carol, you know."

"But why was the night for the circus *changed?*" resumed Miss Phipps.

"Nay, I don't know. It was Ted. Thursday night it was to have been, and then on Tuesday night he comes round to our place and says it's got to be Wednesday — last night. Well, I told him about Mrs. Dyer and he was sorry but he couldn't change the night, he said, and you see I couldn't put him off about young Carol, could I? I mean, a baby!" said Mrs. Hoyle, as if that explained everything — as indeed it did. "So I said to Mrs. Dyer, I says, why not have the chicken tomorrow, I says? Your auntie may enjoy it better, I says, than after a long railway journey, five hours from London as I understand, which is not very appetizing to some, Miss Phipps, if you understand me."

"But *why* did your grandson *change* the night for the circus from Thursday to Wednesday?" persisted Miss Phipps.

"Nay, I don't know. Why don't you go and ask him, Miss Phipps?" suggested Mrs. Hoyle. "He'd be right glad to see you. He reads your books, you know. He works in that big garage in Yelbeck High Street."

Stephen went to school nowadays, but Baby Pam accompanied Miss Phipps and Ruth to High Street in her carriage. The carriage, Miss Phipps noticed, was rather scratched as to its enamel, and while Pam faced the winter cold in warm bright blue, her gloves were mended and her mother's coat was shabby. Remembering a phrase of Mrs. Hoyle's, Miss Phipps tried delicately to probe the reason for this state of affairs, but was obliged to stop, for Ruth showed some sensitivity. She colored and hastily threw out a couple of apparently unconnected statements to the effect that Michael was working far too hard and that Mr. Caracass regretted that overhead was so high. (Mr. Caracass, of course, was Michael's partner in the firm of cloth merchants.) Miss Phipps, pretending to notice nothing of her niece's irrita-

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tion, glided smoothly into arrangements for meeting half an hour later for coffee.

They parted at the entrance to the huge glass-covered shed which housed the Yelbeck Motor Company as Pam waved goodbye enchantingly.

Ted Hoyle, when extracted from a deep pit beneath a car, proved to be a large quiet young man in stained overalls, pleasant-looking in all such parts of his face and person as could be perceived between smears of oil and grease. He seemed to recognize Miss Phipps at once (could it be the pince-nez?) and said he was glad to do anything to oblige his grandma. Miss Phipps, looking up at him earnestly, explained her purpose.

"A single action may start off a chain of others," continued Miss Phipps.

"Like the combustion cycle," agreed Ted calmly, nodding.

Miss Phipps did not know what a combustion cycle was, but from the general opinion she had formed of Ted, she was sure he was right, and said so.

"I am tracing back one effect to its cause."

"The spark," said Ted.

"So would you kindly tell me why you changed the night of your circus party from Thursday to Wednesday? Unless it's too private a matter, of course," said Miss Phipps hastily, remembering too late that Carol might be concerned.

"Nay, it's not private," said Ted in his quiet drawl. "This is an all-night garage and we take turns at the late shift. Wednesday's my late night usually, so I fixed to take Grandma and Carol on Thursday. Then Mr. Langland asked me to change my late night to Thursday this week — to tonight. And that's all there was to it."

Mr. Langland being, Miss Phipps gathered, Ted's boss, and since the change did not matter much to anyone so far as Ted knew, Ted had agreed at once and went right off in his lunch hour and booked the circus seats for Wednesday. They were well booked up and he was lucky to get three good ones, and since Friday and Saturday were sold out, he didn't fancy it when his grandma wanted him to change — though of course he was sorry if he'd caused Mrs. Dyer any inconvenience.

"Not at all, I'm sure," said Miss Phipps, and if she was a little disappointed by the prosaic cause in the change of night, she strove not to show it. "Now, may I have a word with Mr. Langland, do you think?"

Mr. Langland, a thin tense forceful person of middle-age, with a pointed mustache, a white coat, and a supervisory air, was conducting a very acrimonious and sarcastic conversation on the telephone about the nondelivery of some promised tires. As the explanations at the other end grew longer, Mr. Langland's sneer grew more and more pronounced.

"Words, words, words!" said he. "Who was it said that the use of words is to conceal thought?"

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Miss Phipps longed to inform him, but she did not dare.

"Well, never mind that!" barked Mr. Langland. "Where are those tires?"

His whole slight person quivered with rage as he fired shot after verbal shot at the dilatory tire manufacturers. By sheer persistence in insult, sheer unremitting rudeness, he finally achieved victory; on a firm promise of immediate delivery he banged down the receiver in triumph. He then for the first time noticed Miss Phipps, took her for a customer, and almost sold her one of the glossy monsters in the show window before she could put her question. This he received at first with some suspicion.

"Why do you want to know?" he barked.

"It's to go in a story in a magazine," drawled Ted, who was standing by, spanner in hand.

Mr. Langland's nervous countenance relaxed very slightly.

"Would the story mention the Yelbeck Boys' Club, then?" asked Mr. Langland.

"Why not?" said Miss Phipps.

Mr. Langland beamed.

"Well, you see, it was my Boys' Club committee," he explained. "Sir George Horsfall rang me up and asked if I could change the night — he's the chairman. I'm the Secretary, you know. Could you possibly make the meeting Thursday, he said. Well, it was a little awkward — such short notice, you see — it was Tuesday when he rang — but it's not a very large committee, only seven, so I rang round and managed to get all the members for Thursday — for tonight, that is. So then I asked Ted here to change night shifts with me, so I could be free tonight. We have a very fine Boys' Club in Yelbeck, Miss Phipps — yes, indeed!"

Miss Phipps felt ashamed. She had mentally relegated Mr. Langland to an inferior moral level as a snappy, aggressive little tyrant, and here he was spending his nights in good works.

"Why not drop into the Club tonight for a few minutes just before 8?" Mr. Langland was saying eagerly. "You'd be surprised, Miss Phipps, at the activities we have there. Table tennis and swimming and P.T. and woodwork — yes, you'd be surprised. You could see Sir George then, too."

"I should very much like to see your club," said Miss Phipps sincerely. "But I should prefer to make contact with Sir George before this evening, if I could."

Mr. Langland shook his head in doubt. "He's a very busy man, is Sir George," he said. "Very busy, indeed. Horsfalls' are about the biggest textile mills in Laire, you know, and that's saying something. Then he's on the Laire City Council, and Chairman of the bench of magistrates, and on dozens of committees in Laire and Yelbeck — he lives at Yelbeck Hall and exhibits chrysanthemums, you know. You'd have to telephone for an appointment, and I don't really know when you would get one, I don't indeed."

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Miss Phipps, who already had her ideas of how to reach Sir George, smiled, thanked Mr. Langland for his invitation to the Boys' Club, promised to visit him there later in the week, and withdrew.

"I write detective stories," said Miss Phipps.

"Never read 'em," said Sir George.

"Then you have a pleasure in store," returned Miss Phipps with her blandest smile.

"H'm," said Sir George, looking at her with more interest from beneath his bushy brows.

Undaunted by the immense façade and towering chimney of Bridge Mills, Miss Phipps had passed boldly under the echoing archway and across the great courtyard, and stormed in turn the Inquiries Office, the General Office, the Chairman's Office, and Sir George's private secretary by the expedient of announcing that she had business with Sir George concerning the Yelbeck Boys' Club. Now, seated in a fine oak chair on a thick blue carpet in a large paneled room, she gazed across an expanse of desk on which lay nothing but a copy of the *Laire Post*, folded at the Yelbeck Junction story. Sir George was undoubtedly formidable. He had that short but sturdy and well-muscled build so frequently found in Northshire, a massive head thrust forward on a bull neck, untidy graying hair, a lined red face, and extremely shrewd blue eyes. He was admirably clothed in what Miss Phipps correctly judged to be some of his own finest worsted cloth, dark blue in color, with impeccable linen and a subdued tie. From time to time his secretary, a stern woman of about Miss Phipps's own age, entered the room with papers or queries. Each time she opened the door the strong, heavy hum of a vast collection of textile machinery throbbed on the air. Miss Phipps enjoyed this industrial scene, which was new to her.

"Well, what's it all about, then? You got in to see me by saying you came about the Yelbeck Boys' Club."

"If you didn't wish to see me about the Yelbeck Boys' Club then it was useless for me to see you at all," said Miss Phipps with a smile.

"Is that meant for flattery, eh?"

"Not altogether," admitted Miss Phipps.

"Is it a subscription you want?"

Miss Phipps emphatically shook her head.

"Is it about young Michael Dyer?"

"I see you know more of me than you choose to admit," said his visitor.

"I'm not a born fool, you know," said Sir George. "I don't let strangers in to see me without making some inquiries. You're Michael's wife's aunt, who makes her brass by telling women tales. I knew Michael's father pretty well when he was alive. Pity he died while Michael was in the war. How's Michael getting on, eh? Of course, cloth merchants aren't what they used to be — conditions in the trade have changed. But old man Dyer had a well-established firm in his

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day. What about this chap Carcase, or something such, that old Dyer took in as partner while he was ill and Michael was in Burma, eh?"

"Caracass is the name."

"It's not a Northshire name," said Sir George with a hostility only half pretended. "I never heard of such a name. How about this Caracass, then, eh?"

Miss Phipps was saved by the telephone from the necessity of inventing a reply. Sir George, picking up the receiver with the calm of a man well protected from casual callers, presently allowed his eyes to stray to the newspaper open on his desk.

"Aye, it's a bad do," he concluded the conversation.

"Murder?" ventured Miss Phipps.

"Well, that or manslaughter. There's not much point in murdering poor old Tom."

"You mean that the point, the motive, is not yet discovered," said Miss Phipps shrewdly.

Sir George stared at her.

"You're not such a fool as you look by any means," he said at length. "But you shouldn't wear cloth like that, you know. Doesn't do young Michael credit. I'd send you a length, but he'd be vexed. Now, what d'you want, eh?"

Miss Phipps explained.

"And what would you get for a story like that, eh?" inquired Sir George, affably contemptuous.

Miss Phipps told him.

"Would you indeed?" said Sir George, genuinely surprised. "It's a good-paying job, writing stories, eh?"

"It depends who writes them," said Miss Phipps laconically. ("With men of this kind," she said to herself, "one must keep one's trumpet constantly in play.") "Design, quality, finish, you know," she added, having read these words on an advertisement of the Bridge Mills product in the outer office.

"Know all the answers, don't you?" said Sir George with a muffled snort — probably, thought Miss Phipps, intended as a laugh. "Well, it was this way. I have to see the local textile Union representative, Fred Shackleton, about a Trade Union matter. We'd fixed late afternoon Thursday, but then —"

"He asked you to change to Wednesday?"

"Not exactly. He works here, you see, and as I was passing through the pressing room on Tuesday he stepped up to me and said, 'It was Thursday we fixed, wasn't it?' I knew by the way he said Thursday he wanted to change. And so —"

"To put him in a good humor for the negotiations you told him you found Wednesday would suit you better after all?"

"Something like that. I'm not a born fool, you know."

"May I go down and see this young man?"

"Fred? Aye. I'll have you taken down," said Sir George, pressing a button. "Now, mind what you say to him. He's a bit hot-headed, is Fred. I don't want to be splashed all over

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the press as making underhand inquiries into my employees' private affairs, you know."

"I'm not a born fool," replied Miss Phipps, rising.

Sir George snorted.

After an alarming journey through what seemed to be miles of clacking, clattering, thudding, banging machines, Miss Phipps emerged into the comparative calm of an electrically driven apparatus the size of a cottage, which purred gently in a room of its own. This giant was manipulated by Fred, who wore upstanding ginger hair, a fierce expression, and a smart pullover.

"I am conducting a piece of sociological research which I intend to use in a short story," stated Miss Phipps.

Fred diminished the monster's purr by turning a switch, and prepared to listen, hands on hips.

"I am tracing, step by step through the sociological field, the consequences of a single individual change of plan. This will reveal, I believe, the economic nexus which binds modern society so closely."

"It's an interesting idea," conceded Fred. "Of course, you've got to remember that once the initial act has taken place, all sorts of innocent people will be involved without their own volition — like puppets," he declaimed fiercely, "dancing to the strings pulled by big business in the seats of power."

Miss Phipps coughed gently. "You have an interesting point there," she said. "Now what made *you* ask Sir George to change the day of his appointment with you?"

"I never asked him!" exclaimed Fred, aggrieved. "I just mentioned the day to confirm it and he said Wednesday would suit him better. As it happened, it suited me better too."

"Why?"

"It wasn't as if I were delaying Union business by the change," continued Fred belligerently.

"No — of course not. But why did you prefer Wednesday?" murmured Miss Phipps in a gentle, soothing tone.

"Well, fact is," said Fred, "my young lady had a night off. From rehearsals, you know. She's a member of the Laire Thespians and they're doing Shakespeare. Henry Fifth. Been at it for weeks. It's a very imperialist play in my opinion, but as Doris says, you have to take the rough with the smooth."

"And Doris is playing a part?"

"That's right," said Fred. "She had Thursday booked for rehearsal, but then there was a change — some people are very inconsiderate, you know, never think how what they do affects anyone else. So she found she had Thursday — tonight — free after all. With Sir George changing his mind, like, me and Doris will have a night out together tonight in spite of all — first I've had with her for long enough."

"Now come, Mr. Shackleton," said Miss Phipps persuasively. "By a

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skillful use of your tone of voice you forced Wednesday on Sir George, didn't you?"

Fred scowled. Then he grinned.

"Happen I did. Doesn't do to let the old so-and-so have all his own way, you know," he said.

"Just so. And where could I find Doris?" inquired Miss Phipps.

"Miss Earnshaw teaches in Laire, at Morning Road school," said Fred stiffly.

He turned the switch down and the monster purred again.

Miss Phipps, late for lunch, rushed into Ruth's neat little dining room full of apologies. But these, she found, were scarcely needed. Michael, eating a boiled potato with a marked lack of enthusiasm, wore a somber frown; Ruth, feeding Pam in her high chair, seemed quiet and preoccupied, and Pam catching her mother's gloom looked ready to be tearful. Only Stephen appeared lively.

"Please forgive us for not waiting, Aunt Marian," said Ruth.

"Of course, my dear. I'm disgracefully late."

"Daddy couldn't wait because he has to rush back to see the police again," announced Stephen.

"The police!" exclaimed Miss Phipps, startled.

"A burglar broke into Michael's office last night after he had left," said Ruth in a choked tone.

"Good heavens! What did he steal?"

"He seems to have been interrupted in the job before he got hold of much," said Michael. "Not that there was much to steal. The safe door was open when I got there this morning, and some papers were scattered on the ground in a considerable mess, and the petty-cash box and one or two other things were gone. Probably the policeman on the beat passed by and the man took fright."

"The loss isn't very serious, then?" asked Miss Phipps.

"Well, it's all rather perplexing and silly," said Michael with a worried look. "You see, the Stock Book's gone."

"What's a Stock Book?" inquired Miss Phipps.

"It shows the inventory of cloths we have in hand."

"What is the significance of its disappearance?"

"Well, it's silly of course," said Michael as before, "but nowadays one is apt to have suspicions when a firm's Stock Book or Account Books disappear. It's a trick that's been played too often to get by. Those books would reveal any kind of — well, cheating, you see. And with our stock-taking due next week — well, it all seems odd. The worst of it is that the police seem to think it was an inside job. The outer door and the private office door and the safe showed no signs of having been forced. Apparently they had all been opened with keys."

"And who is suspected of this theft?" she said.

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"At present," said Michael bitterly, "they appear to suspect me."

"What!"

"Michael! Not in front of the children!" exclaimed Ruth in anguish.

The meal went on in gloomy silence until the children had finished at last and were allowed to leave.

"Why do the police entertain this absurd suspicion?" said Miss Phipps then in a stern tone.

"Well, Aunt Marian, I'm bound to say I could easily have done it — though, of course, I haven't," said Michael unhappily. "No alarm was given last night. No stranger, nothing out of the ordinary, was seen. I was working late, and was the last to leave the warehouse. I locked up after all the rest had gone. The Town Hall clock struck 6:30 as I came down the steps. Nobody but myself and Simon had the necessary keys."

"Simon?"

"Simon Caracass."

"And where was Mr. Caracass during the period of the burglary?"

"He left for London last night by the 6:30 train. What he's going to say about it all when he gets back tonight," said Michael with a heavy sigh, "I'm sure I don't know. Or rather, I can guess. He always has plenty to say about everything. Well, I must go. Try not to worry too much, Ruth."

He kissed his wife and left the house, his pleasant young face drawn with anxiety.

Ruth, having dispatched Stephen to School and put Pam to bed for her afternoon nap, brought Miss Phipps a cup of coffee and then burst into tears. Mr. Caracass, it seemed, was so difficult, so severe. He was bound to blame Michael for the burglary — he blamed Michael for everything. He was very strict, and had cut down the amount Michael drew from the business until — well, really, until it was very difficult for the Dyers to manage on it. Michael had been working very hard indeed, lately, to see if economies could be effected in the business, but in vain. He dreaded the semi-annual stock-taking which was soon to begin. It was all very worrying. If things grew any worse, Ruth would be obliged to dispense with the services of Mrs. Hoyle, and that would be a tragedy. Mrs. Hoyle was so kind, so good, so experienced. . . . It was all very worrying indeed.

Miss Phipps soothed and comforted Ruth as well as she could before setting out to find Miss Doris Earnshaw. She was loath to leave her niece and loath to go out into the cold dark afternoon, but in view of Ruth's financial confidences, it seemed more than ever desirable that her projected story should be completed.

"Mr. Fred Shackleton gave me your address," said Miss Phipps to Miss Earnshaw, who was young and pretty, with brown curls and dancing eyes.

"Oh, him!" exclaimed Miss Earnshaw with a light irony in her tone.

Miss Phipps gathered that Miss

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Earnshaw had other suitors more favored than poor Fred. She tried another tack.

"The stage is your main interest, I believe?" she said.

"Well, yes and no," said Miss Earnshaw frankly. "The Children Must Come First, must they not? That's the teacher's slogan, you know."

Miss Phipps perceived that though Miss Earnshaw, in the modern fashion, mocked herself, she meant what she said. Miss Phipps looked around her at the great glass windows (on which rain now beat pitilessly through the dark), the wide corridors, the crayon drawings lining the cheerful pale blue walls.

"This school seems very well equipped," she said.

"It's not bad and that's a fact," admitted Miss Earnshaw. "New, you know."

"And which class — what age of children — do you teach?"

"I'm a specialist," explained Miss Earnshaw with a touching youthful pride. "I give speech training throughout the school."

"I see. And so naturally you belong to the Laire Thespians."

"Well, it's not as natural as falling off a tree," objected Miss Earnshaw. "There's an audition, you know, and quite stiff tests. However the chairman said he thought I was promising — though I didn't promise *him* anything, believe you me!" disclaimed Miss Earnshaw with lively relish.

"You have a part in the production of Henry Fifth?" pursued Miss Phipps, smiling.

"That's right. Mistress Quickly," said Miss Earnshaw cheerfully.

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Miss Phipps. "I can't imagine you playing that raddled hag."

"Oh, I love acting raddled hags. It's easier to play a character part than a straight one," explained Miss Earnshaw. "Something quite different from yourself, if you know what I mean."

"I wonder," said Miss Phipps with cunning, "if the story I am planning would make a play?" At this the gleam of interest she had hoped for lighted up in Miss Earnshaw's agreeable eyes. "I should like your opinion — but I must first ask you, why was your rehearsal changed from tonight to last night?"

"Oh, that I can't tell you. It was our beloved merry widow, our leading lady, who was responsible for the switch," said Miss Earnshaw sardonically. "Joan to some, Mrs. Ingram to me. I don't know if you know anything about producing plays, Miss Phipps — ah, I see you do," she said, catching herself up quickly. "Well, amateurs after all are only amateurs; they can rehearse only at night and they don't want every night for weeks and weeks engaged. They have their private affairs after all, you see," said Miss Earnshaw, her bright eyes sparkling. "So sometimes we have sectional rehearsals — act one or all the scenes with Bardolph on one

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night, and act two or no Bardolph the next. Well, we were rehearsing all the Bardolph scenes on Thursday, and I'm in a Bardolph scene; and on Wednesday we were doing the scenes with the French princess and Henry in camp at night. It had all been settled and put up on the notice board ages ago. Then suddenly on Monday night Mrs. Ingram, who is playing the Princess, said she couldn't come on Wednesday after all. Tony Harris — he's our producer — fumed and tore his hair, but then Ingram went all temperamental — no, stop me!" said Miss Earnshaw, holding up a hand in a charming gesture of self-admonition, "I'm being catty. Mrs. Ingram, I remember now, said she couldn't help her absence because it was due to business, and as a poor lone lorn widow she couldn't afford to alienate her boss, and so on. There was one of those frightfully involved and heated arguments which seem to be an inseparable feature of amateur theatrical life, and when the dust had subsided I found my rehearsal had been switched to Wednesday night — last night. So I had to give poor Fred the air for Wednesday. He came to the Playhouse to call for me on Monday night, and I told him then. And the foolish creature went and changed his own plans. So silly, really! As if he had a hope! Poor Fred! Of course it's time he got married," concluded Miss Earnshaw maternally, "so long as he doesn't marry me."

Miss Phipps's opinion of Fred's prospects suddenly improved greatly.

"I should like to attend the Thespian rehearsal tonight," she said.

"Why not? Just barge in and ask for Mrs. Ingram," said Miss Earnshaw, giving her the Playhouse address. "After all, Tony Harris can't eat you. Or can he? If he tries, butter him up a bit and he'll come round."

"It will need to be the best butter," reflected Miss Phipps in some dismay.

She felt tired and dispirited. The chicken which had been the cause of her long odyssey, though admirably cooked by Mrs. Hoyle, might have been sawdust for all the enjoyment it had brought that evening to the Dyer household. Michael had left in the middle of the meal to meet his partner's train in Laire; it was clear that he regarded their coming interview with apprehension. Ruth was pale with worry and could not eat; Miss Phipps, making admiring noises about Mrs. Hoyle's cooking, heroically stuffed down morsels for which she had no appetite. The night was cold, the rain had become a deluge, the stage entrance to the Playhouse was in a back street which her Yelbeck taxi-driver found difficult to locate. Now a flight of dark stone steps loomed and sounds of conflict rose to her ears.

"Quiet! Quiet, please! *LISTEN!*" bellowed an angry voice, male.

Miss Phipps sighed, negotiated the steps carefully, and pushed open a swinging door placarded with commands to keep it closed.

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To her astonishment she found herself on a stage. The headquarters of the Laire Thespians consisted, in fact, of an extensive cellar, so agreeably decorated in shades of cherry and gray as to convey the complete illusion of a theatre, and fitted with a cyclorama and all that complicated lighting apparatus dear to a stage director's heart. Three or four Thespians on stepladders and chairs were painting a backcloth with the likeness of a Fifteenth Century French castle. In cherry-velvet stalls, from which the white covers had been pushed back, lounged a score of Thespians, male and female, whose interchange of gossip had provoked the plea for silence. On the stage with their backs to Miss Phipps stood a good-looking fair young man, a small, beautiful, dark and sophisticated woman, and a bouncing girl, who appeared to be Henry V and Katharine, with Alice in attendance, playing the wooing scene.

"*Les langues des hommes sont pleines de tromperies*," coquettishly remarked Katharine, who was presumably Mrs. Ingram.

Her voice was sweet and low, and her French accent prettily assumed, but Miss Phipps was not sure whether she liked her. While Alice was explaining to Henry that the princess meant the tongues of men were full of deceits, Miss Phipps took a step forward in order to get a fuller view of Mrs. Ingram's face.

"This is too much!" yelled a very thin young man with a beaky face and long tangled hair, charging down the aisle towards the stage. "Who are you? What do you want? Coming on the stage during rehearsal like this!"

"Perhaps she's come to do some whitewashing, Tony," suggested Henry V in a soothing tone.

"Then let her go round by the other entrance," shouted Tony crossly.

Miss Phipps disclaimed whitewashing. "I just came to have a word with Mrs. Ingram," she said. "But I should like to watch you at work for a few moments, if I may."

At her name Mrs. Ingram turned quickly towards the speaker.

"Ah, no," reflected Miss Phipps, "I don't altogether like her. It's a beautiful face, but ravaged and unhappy. It's the face of a woman who has found the tongues of men full of deceits, certainly." Aloud she added, on a flattering note, "I write for the magazines."

Tony's face cleared. "Well — come down into the auditorium, will you?" he said. "Henry, give the lady a hand."

Miss Phipps was carefully lowered over the footlights by Henry V and one of the painters, and welcomed to a velvet seat and a cigarette. The rehearsal recommenced.

"Now let's have something a little more *soldierly* in your movements, Henry," urged Tony. "As though you were accustomed to wearing *armor*, you know."

Henry obediently clumped about the stage, while Mrs. Ingram played,

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with a good deal of finish and experience, a most enticingly demure French princess.

"I'm lucky to find you here tonight," said Miss Phipps when at length the scene was finished and cups of tea came in on a huge tray and the Thespians were gathered round her, all hoping to appear (with picture) in a glossy-papered, large-circulation magazine. "I had understood that Mrs. Ingram's scenes were to have been rehearsed last night?"

"So they were," said several Thespians in chorus, while others, by winks, nods, and shrugs, conveyed to Miss Phipps that she was on dangerous ground.

"So they were if Joan hadn't upset the whole schedule at the last minute," said Tony irritably. "Really it was too bad, you know, Joan."

"Now don't start all that again, Tony. I told you before," said Mrs. Ingram, her dark eyes flashing, "that I couldn't help the change. When your boss wants you to meet him at the railway station with some important papers he needs in London, you've got to do it or risk your job. If you'd let me be late I could have managed it."

"Boss my foot," said Tony crossly. "You know perfectly well he's your boy friend."

"If he knew on Monday he wanted the papers, surely he could remember to take them with him on Wednesday," argued Henry V, not, thought Miss Phipps, without some logic.

"He was in Northcaster all day and didn't want to cart them about with him. Now don't *badger* me," said Joan Ingram angrily, her beautiful voice taking on a shriller note. "I had to oblige my employer, and that's that. Give me another butt, Tony, if you've got any manners.'

"And who *is* your employer, my dear?" murmured Miss Phipps, proffering her own cigarettes.

Mrs. Ingram told her.

Miss Phipps, taking off her macintosh in the Dyers' hall, heard unfamiliar voices coming from the lounge. She stood by the door and listened unashamedly.

"I think you must see, Mr. Dyer," said an official voice, "that the question of the keys is vital — especially since we have found the cashbox, still intact, in the river by Laire Bridge, not three minutes' walk from the front door of your warehouse. You were in your office alone, you had the necessary keys. Some explanation is obviously necessary."

"It is the disappearance of the Stock Book which troubles me most," said a voice more Oxonian than any Miss Phipps had yet heard in Northshire. "It appears to me, Superintendent — of course, I merely throw this out as a tentative suggestion — quite provisional, you understand, I don't wish to be thought to be making any accusation — but it seems to me — I'm sorry to have to say this, Dyer — it seems to me that the burglary, or shall I say the appearance of burglary, might well have been

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contrived to cover the disappearance of the Stock Book, that the disappearance of the book was, in fact, the prime object of the apparent burglary. We — the firm of Dyer and Caracass — are to take stock at the end of this month, Superintendent. Without the Stock Book the stock-taking must necessarily be a maimed rite. To a firm of the long integrity of mine, this will come as a very painful innovation."

"If there were to be any question of, say, bankruptcy," pursued the official voice carefully, "any disappearance of account books would be very suspicious. Otherwise, the matter would be primarily one for you two gentlemen, who are partners, to worry about. Now you, Mr. Caracass — you were out of town last evening, I believe? And your keys were on your person?"

"I left Laire at 6:30 P.M., carrying my keys," said the smooth liquid voice of Mr. Caracass. "My keys are always on my key chain."

"Mr. Caracass," interrupted Ruth's voice, harsh with pain. "Can you prove you left Laire at 6:30 last night?"

"As it happens, I can," said Caracass with a little casual-sounding laugh. "I was in Northcaster all day Wednesday, you remember, Dyer. Finding I had not brought with me some papers I should require in London, I phoned Mrs. Ingram, our secretary, and asked her to meet me at Laire station with the papers. She saw me leave on the 6:30 train."

"No, no!" cried Miss Phipps, bounding into the room. "That's a lie!"

"Aunt Marian!" exclaimed Ruth in horror.

"If this is your idea of a joke, madam," said Mr. Caracass coldly, "it strikes me as both ridiculous and tasteless."

Mr. Caracass, observed Miss Phipps, was one of those slim, tall, dark men whose careful tan gave them an air of distinction. His suit was impeccable both in cloth and cut — "It's as good as Sir George's — poor Michael looks shabby beside him," reflected Miss Phipps rapidly. "Yet why if they're equal partners —"

"Mrs. Ingram certainly witnessed my departure," concluded Mr. Caracass, eyeing Miss Phipps with icy distaste.

"Yes — and then you left the train at Yelbeck Junction as it crawled slowly up the hill, and you caught a train down to Laire and went back to the office and stole the Stock Book — and then caught a later train to London," said Miss Phipps rapidly. "And while you were changing trains the first time at Yelbeck, you met poor Tom the stationmaster on the stairs, and he knew you and could have broken your alibi. So you murdered him."

"Superintendent, you hear this public defamation of my character?" began Caracass in his eloquent way.

"Be careful, madam," warned the detective, watching her, however, with a good deal of interest.

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"I can prove you arranged with Mrs. Ingram that she should see you off on Wednesday, thus giving you an apparent alibi, as early as Monday afternoon," said Miss Phipps.

"I think not. I'm sure Mrs. Ingram will not confirm that statement," said Caracass with cold conviction.

("That," thought Miss Phipps, "is only too likely, since she's probably your mistress.") "Luckily I have seven witnesses to that fact," said she, "who provide an unbreakable chain of evidence. A combustion-cycle springing from the spark of your need for an alibi."

"Nonsense!" said Caracass with contempt. But his accent had slipped a little. "How could you possibly have any such evidence?"

"You asked Mrs. Ingram to keep Wednesday evening free for you, so she changed her rehearsal with Doris Earnshaw. So Doris changed her outing with Fred Shackleton. So Fred Shackleton changed his Trade Union interview with Sir George Horsfall. So Sir George changed the Boy's Club Committee meeting with Mr. Langland. So Mr. Langland changed his late shift with Ted Hoyle. So Ted changed his circus night with his grandmother. So Mrs. Hoyle couldn't cook our supper on Wednesday. And they all," concluded Miss Phipps triumphantly, "made the change between Monday and Tuesday night."

"And what significance are we supposed to impute to all this?" said Caracass, rising to his feet.

"You've been cheating Michael Dyer for months — sales never seem to turn out as well as he expects. I daresay you cheated his dying father for years while Michael was in Burma," said Miss Phipps, reckless now. "You probably made love to Mrs. Ingram so she would help you, for she knows the tongues of men are full of deceit. Your flow of words is intended to conceal your thought. It's easier to play a character part than a straight one," Miss Phipps continued in a rush of inspiration, quoting some of the words of wisdom she had learned from her seven witnesses. "Caracass" — she reached her climax with Sir George — "Caracass sounds a made-up name."

Mr. Caracass sprang with hands outstretched.

He succeeded only in tearing Miss Phipps's pince-nez from their chain before the detective and Michael caught him and held him fast.

When he had been taken down to the Yelbeck police station for questioning, Miss Phipps, Ruth, and Mrs. Hoyle sat down to a happy cup of tea. Miss Phipps had to recount again and again to her admiring audience the chain of events which had led her to the truth.

"Of course it was a great piece of luck," she said modestly, "that one end of the chain lay in your own kitchen."

"Yes, in a way," agreed Ruth. "But if Mr. Caracass hadn't been so hard on us in money matters, you

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know, you wouldn't have troubled to go on with the story. You did it so as to be able to make me a present of it, Aunt Marian, you know you did!"

"Well," began Miss Phipps in an acquiescing tone.

"So it wasn't just luck," said Ruth. "It was that wicked man's own fault." She nodded righteously.

"There's a verse in the Bible as tells what it was," said Mrs. Hoyle with a chuckle. "*He that diggeth a pit shall fall into it.* Eh," concluded Mrs. Hoyle, beaming. "That's lovely, that one is!"

"You're right as usual, Mrs. Hoyle," agreed Miss Phipps.

THE FUTURE . . .

And now mystery in the future . . .

Just how far in the future the author, Matthew Gant, had in mind is not made clear. Judge for yourself. But the future, as depicted in "The Crate at Outpost 1," will make you pause — and think. Matthew Gant has written a tantalizing, disturbing, provocative, fascinating story — with a terrific bang at the end.

The author tells us only a few facts about himself. He is in his early thirties, has been a newspaper reporter, a publicity agent for a Brooklyn burlesque, and (briefly) one of "the most despised men in the world — a conductor on the Long Island Railroad."

Mr. Gant, send us more stories . . .

THE CRATE AT OUTPOST 1

by MATTHEW GANT

THE WIND WHISTLED THROUGH THE valley, and the pyramidal tent that signified Outpost 1 quivered before the blast. As always, sentry Rudd placed his hand before the oil burner that feebly lit the interior of the tent, shielding the yellow flame from the stray gusts that whipped through the torn canvas. And, as always, he cast a quick, nearly guilty look at sentry Dennison who lay fully dressed on a narrow cot in the rear of the tent.

"It won't explode," Dennison said. He lay on his back, his hands resting behind his head, and his eyes stared at the sloping ceiling. Occasionally he wiggled his fingers and watched with amusement the play of shadows on the

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canvas stretching tautly overhead.

"I know," Rudd said; biting his lip and looking away.

"Then why do you do it?" Dennison asked.

"I don't know," Rudd said. He spread his hands.

Outside, the wind sank for a moment and from far off came the barking of dogs. Rudd shivered and drew the frayed collar of his parka close about him. He stole a quick look at Dennison, and then his eyes shifted to the corner of the tent, just to the left of the doorway flap.

The crate was still there.

"What are you afraid of?" Dennison asked. "It won't move."

"I don't know," Rudd said again, and then he flared for a moment. "It's our job. We must see the crate!"

He stood up defiantly and strode to the crate. It squatted in the corner, four feet high, four feet long, four feet wide. It was of wood, nailed securely across the top.

Rudd remembered the last nailing detail. They had come in during the warm weather and ripped out the rusting nails with their hands. One of them had howled when a nail slipped and gashed his palm. The nail-driver was the biggest man Rudd had ever seen. He pounded the new, shiny nails with the heel of his rifle, and soon the crate was nearly as good as new.

And while they had changed the nails, a two-striper had stood over the detail, with a rifle that shone dully in the flickering gloom of the tent.

Rudd had seen many nailing details come and go. The thought filled him with pride. Ever since they had landed on this island outpost, he and Dennison had been assigned to see the crate.

"You can see it from your bed," Dennison said, breaking the thoughts. "There's no rule about not seeing it from your bed."

"I don't care," Rudd said. "It's easier to see it from here."

Dennison said, "Ah-h-h," and the sound turned into a yawn. "Wake me when the two-striper comes," he said.

Rudd flinched. He wanted to tell Dennison he should not sleep while on duty. He was not supposed to see the crate alone. When the two-striper had told them the order, this had been emphasized:

"Never see the crate alone. Always make sure you're both seeing it at the same time. One man alone cannot be trusted!"

And both Dennison and Rudd had nodded, gravely.

But it was always the same. Dennison would sleep until the two-striper reached the flap and then, cursing, try to find the tent buttons. And when the two-striper finally strode to the tent's center and reviewed his sentries, Dennison would be on his feet, gripping his rifle.

Once Dennison hadn't been lucky. The two-striper had found the buttons more quickly than usual and the soft mud outside had cushioned his steps — so that he was inside before Dennison woke. Dennison had to stand for a very long time after that.

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And the two-striper had lectured him about the crate.

"Do you know why you're here, soldier?" the two-striper had asked Dennison.

"Yes," Dennison said. "To see the crate."

"And why see the crate?" the two-striper persisted.

"So nobody gets it," Dennison answered, his face reddening under the softly spoken questions.

"And why should nobody get it?" the two-striper probed.

Dennison had stammered at that and Rudd had wanted to help him out, but he didn't want to risk standing for a very long time also. Besides, he wasn't sure he knew the answer.

"Because," the two-striper snapped. "That's why, you fool."

And Dennison repeated, "Because."

The two-striper imposed the sentence and left.

Later that night Rudd had whispered to Dennison, who stood there, his rifle clutched tight in his hands. "Are you awake?"

"Yes," Dennison had said.

"I was wondering," Rudd said, "I was wondering about something."

"You're always wondering about something," Dennison said. "What's it this time?"

"I was wondering because why," he said, his voice still a whisper in the pitch-black tent.

"Because why what?" Dennison asked harshly.

"Nothing," Rudd said, and he turned to see the crate although it was too dark to make it out clearly.

But gradually he had found the nerve to ask, and Dennison, who had been in the service far longer than he and who had once been a one-striper himself, finally told him.

"Because the crate was once owned by the enemy, long, long ago," he had said, and even Dennison, who slept when he should have been seeing the crate, let his eyes creep to the flap in case the two-striper — or, even worse, the yellow-bar — were near.

"The enemy!" Rudd had exclaimed, his eyes bugging.

"Shut up, you fool," Dennison warned.

And after that many seasons of warm-to-cold had gone by before Rudd had asked any more questions and learned any more about why the crate had to be constantly seen.

Dennison did not know the whole story — no man did, he said. But the facts were these: the crate contained an enemy weapon, an old and very powerful weapon, which must never be allowed to fall into the enemy's hands again. And during bad times, such as now when the dogs were out barking in pursuit of enemy-smell, the crate had to be seen all the time — so that nobody could take it away.

It was as simple as that.

From that time on Rudd felt the pride of his job, and he wondered even more strongly how Dennison could sleep when he should be seeing.

Especially during bad times, when the dogs were barking.

Rudd had never heard so much

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barking as these past nights. He wished, sometimes, he were back with the others, instead of being at Outpost 1. Once, last warmth, he had become ill and a doctor had visited him, a one-striper. Before he had left, the doctor had told him of the others.

"They are sick-afraid," he had said. "They say the enemy is nearer."

But though for a moment Rudd, too, was sick-afraid, he laughed at the doctor. Doctors knew so little, especially about the movement of soldiers.

But when he told Dennison of it, Dennison didn't laugh. He sat and stared through the open flap at the sun sinking behind the faraway peaks.

And now the dogs were barking as never before. And the two-striper had come in twice this night, instead of once, and even though their share of oil had been burned up, he had brought more.

"See the crate," he said, shortly, as he left.

And Rudd saw the crate, and even Dennison lay there on his bed, his eyes wide open.

They were not relieved until the sun was high the next day.

And the next night when they returned to the tent, the two-striper handed each of them a bullet for their rifles. It was the first time either man had ever held a loaded rifle.

"See the crate," the two-striper had said fiercely before he left. "See the crate!" And Rudd noticed the dark circles under the two-striper's eyes.

"These are bad times," Rudd said to Dennison, staring at him anxiously.

"Bad," Dennison repeated.

"Do you think —?" Rudd started.

"Do I think what?" Dennison said. But his voice was not sharp at all.

"Do you think the enemy is coming?"

Outside the wind howled again, howled loud, but even over the howl came the sound of the dogs.

"I don't know," Dennison said, at last.

Rudd quickly put his hand over the oil burner to shield it from the wind, but this time Dennison didn't say anything. Things were bad, Rudd knew.

He stood straight and he thought: I will do my job. He walked to the crate and leaned on it.

"Don't touch it, you fool," Dennison said.

"Why not?" Rudd asked, puzzled. He had touched it many times before, feeling the creaking wood, and sometimes he had peeled splinters of wood from the crate and used them to make pictures in the mud outside.

"Ah-h-h," Dennison said. "Just don't."

And Rudd walked away, and for some reason he felt ashamed.

Suddenly the outside quivered with noise. The dogs were nearby now, and there must have been hundreds of them, yapping and howling, and Dennison said, "Listen."

"The barking is loud," Rudd said.

"No, not the barking. I can hear the gnashing of their teeth."

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Rudd listened and he heard, too, and he thrilled to the sound. "The enemy will never get to us, not with those dogs of ours," he boasted.

And through the sound came the clomping of a man's heavy boots, running through the thick mud.

"The enemy!" Rudd said involuntarily, his hands tightening over the stock of the rifle, his hand reaching for the bolt.

But it wasn't the enemy. It was a one-striper, the advance runner.

He stood swaying in the center of the tent, a huge man with a black beard, his eyes red-rimmed and circled with the same sort of black lines, though even deeper, as those under the two-striper's.

"Is this it?" he panted, pointing to the crate. It had been many seasons since Rudd had seen the runner and he looked much older, and Rudd felt sorry that the runner didn't even remember the crate.

"Yes," he said. "That's it."

The runner stood there and the tent was still. He bent once and lightly moved his hand toward the crate, and then drew it back quickly. He spun on his heavy boots and faced the sentries.

"You must run," he said. "We are beaten."

"Beaten?" Rudd said. "I don't believe it!"

Dennison stared at the runner and then he sat up on his cot and started to pull on his boots. "Come on," he said to Rudd, "we don't have all night."

"But —"

"Beaten," the runner insisted.

"And the crate?" Rudd said. "The crate?"

"Destroy it," the runner said. "But quickly. You have no time. You must go to the hills when you have finished. Do you have enough oil?"

Rudd stared at the lamp which flamed full and strong.

"No, you fool," Dennison said, "not for the lamp. For the crate. The enemy must not get the crate."

The runner handed Rudd a can of oil, and with his bayonet ripped it open. He stood at the flap for a long moment, and then he raised his hand to his eyes. "Goodbye," he said, "and hurry."

Rudd stared at the open can of oil and then he started to pour it on the wooden slats across the top of the crate. The barking was frantic now — only yards away, it seemed.

Dennison tore the can from his hand. "No," he panted, "there may be something inside the wood that can't be destroyed this way — wet packing or metal or something. We'll have to remove the top." He reached for the wood and started to pull at the slats.

"No," Rudd said. "We're not allowed to. We must see the crate, not what's inside."

But Dennison would not be stopped, and Rudd watched as the slats groaned and pulled up sharply. Some cracked in Dennison's hands as he clawed at them, and suddenly, the last two slats came up together and the top was off.

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They moved back a pace and looked down. There was a sheet of yellowed paper, with five black marks on it, concealing the contents of the crate. Dennison reached out and grabbed the paper away and they both leaned forward to see.

They looked up at each other and there was a frown on the forehead of each of them. Inside the crate were boxlike things, most of them the length of a man's hand-span, maybe a little longer, not quite as wide, and two or three fingers deep. Each one was covered with cloth.

There were steps outside now, and the dogs were no longer near; their barking came from down the valley.

Dennison screamed once, in rage and fear, as he sprinkled oil frantically on top of the boxlike things and on the yellowed paper with the black marks. Then he thrust a corner of the paper into the oil lamp until it caught fire.

Then they both raced out of the tent and headed for the hills.

And as Rudd ran, he was sick-afraid. Even many seasons later, while he hid in the woods, he still remembered the crate with cringing fear; and sometimes he found himself drawing in the mud and what he drew were the five black marks that had been on the yellowed paper covering the boxlike things inside the crate — the five black marks that looked like

NEXT MONTH . . .

4 prize-winning stories, including:

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In a year in which Stephen Vincent Benét and James Gould Cozzens won First and Second Prizes for their short stories, in a year in which other O. Henry Memorial Awards went to such famous writers as Kay Boyle, Katharine Brush, Dorothy Canfield, Irvin S. Cobb, Walter D. Edmonds, William Faulkner, William March, J. P. Marquand, and Booth Tarkington — in such a magnificent year of short-story writing, Edwin Granberry won a Special Prize for the best short-short story. Mr. Granberry's story, "A Trip to Czardis," is an American classic by now. The O. Henry Award judges "felt at once its power, its grim realism, its terrible pathos." Kenneth Payson Kempton has said that the story "seems to deserve permanence as part — a small but indispensable part — of the world's literature." And yet this story, so unpretentious and yet so eloquent, was rejected by quite a few bigtime editors — "because it was too starkly realistic" — before it was finally published in 1932 by "Forum Magazine."

A TRIP TO CZARDIS

by EDWIN GRANBERRY

IT WAS STILL DARK IN THE PINE woods when the two brothers awoke. But it was plain that day had come, and in a little while there would be no more stars. Day itself would be in the sky and they would be going along the road.

Jim waked first, coming quickly out of sleep and sitting up in the bed to take fresh hold of the things in his head, starting them up again out of the corners of his mind where sleep had tucked them. Then he waked Daniel and they sat up together in the bed. Jim put his arm around his young brother, for the night had been dewy and cool with the swamp wind. Daniel shivered a little and whimpered, it being dark in the room and his baby concerns still on him somewhat, making sleep heavy on his mind and slow to give understanding its way.

"Hit's the day, Dan'l. This day that's right here now, we are goen. You'll recollect it all in a minute."

"I recollect. We are goen in the wagon to see papa —"

"Then hush and don't whine."

"I were dreamen, Jim."

"What dreamen did you have?"

"I can't tell. But it were fearful what I dreamt."

"All the way we are goen this time.

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We won't stop at any places, but we will go all the way to Czardis to see papa. I never see such a place as Czardis."

"I recollect the water tower —"

"Not in your own right, Dan'l. Hit's by my tellen it you see it in your mind."

"And lemonade with ice in it I saw —"

"That too I seen and told to you."

"Then I never seen it at all?"

"Hit's me were there, Dan'l. I let you play like, but hit's me who went to Czardis. Yet I never till this day told half how much I see. There's sights I never told."

They stopped talking, listening for their mother's stir in the kitchen. But the night stillness was unlifted. Daniel began to shiver again.

"Hit's dark," he said.

"Hit's your eyes stuck," Jim said. "Would you want me to drip a little water on your eyes?"

"Oh!" cried the young one, pressing his face into his brother's side, "don't douse me, Jim, no more. The cold aches me."

The other soothed him, holding him around the body.

"You won't have e're chill or malarie ache today, Dan'l. Hit's a fair day —"

"I won't be cold?"

"Hit's a bright day. I hear mournen doves starten a'ready. The sun will bake you warm. . . . Uncle Holly might buy us somethen new to eat in Czardis."

"What would it be?"

"Hit ain't decided yet. . . . He hasn't spoke. Hit might be somethen sweet. Maybe a candy ball fixed on to a rubber string."

"A candy ball!" Daniel showed a stir of happiness. "Oh, Jim!" But it was a deceit of the imagination, making his eyes shine wistfully; the grain of his flesh was against it. He settled into a stillness by himself.

"My stomach would retch it up, Jim. . . . I guess I couldn't eat it."

"You might could keep a little down."

"No . . . I would bring it home and keep it. . . ."

Their mother when they went to bed had laid a clean pair of pants and a waist for each on the chair. Jim crept out of bed and put on his clothes, then aided his brother on with his. They could not hear any noise in the kitchen, but hickory fire wood burning in the kitchen stove worked a smell through the house, and in the forest guinea fowls were sailing down from the trees and poking their way along the half-dark ground toward the kitchen steps, making it known the door was open and that within someone was stirring about at the getting of food.

Jim led his brother by the hand down the dark way of yellow-pine stairs that went narrowly and without banisters to the rooms below. The young brother went huddling in his clothes, hungering for his place by the stove, to sit in peace on the bricks in the floor by the stove's side and watch the eating, it being his nature

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to have a sickness against food.

They came in silence to the kitchen, Jim leading and holding his brother by the hand. The floor was lately strewn with fresh bright sand and that would sparkle when the daybreak got above the forest, though now it lay dull as hoarfrost and cold to the unshod feet of the brothers. The door to the fire box of the stove was open and in front of it their mother sat in a chair speaking low as they entered, muttering under her breath. The boys went near and stood still, thinking she was blessing the food, there being mush dipped up and steaming in two bowls. And they stood cast down until she lifted her eyes to them and spoke.

"Your clothes on already," she said. "You look right neat." She did not rise, but kept her chair, looking cold and stiff, with the cloth of her black dress sagging between her knees. The sons stood in front of her and she laid her hand on first one head and then the other and spoke a little about the day, charging them to be sober and of few words, as she had raised them.

Jim sat on the bench by the table and began to eat, mixing dark molasses sugar through his bowl of mush. But a nausea began in Daniel's stomach at sight of the sweet and he lagged by the stove, gazing at the food as it passed into his brother's mouth.

Suddenly a shadow filled the back doorway and Holly, their uncle, stood there looking in. He was lean and big and dark from wind and weather, working in the timber as their father had done. He had no wife and children and would roam far off with the timber gangs in the Everglades. This latter year he did not go far, but stayed near them. Their mother stopped and looked at the man and he looked at her in silence. Then he looked at Jim and Daniel.

"You're goen to take them after all?"

She waited a minute, seeming to get the words straight in her mind before bringing them out, making them say what was set there.

"He asked to see them. Nobody but God-Almighty ought to tell a soul hit can or can't have."

Having delivered her mind, she went out into the yard with the man and they spoke more words in an undertone, pausing in their speech.

In the silence of the kitchen, Daniel began to speak out and name what thing among his possessions he would take to Czardis to give his father. But the older boy belittled everything that was called up, saying one thing was of too little consequence for a man, and that another was of no account because it was food. But when the older boy had abolished the idea and silence had regained, he worked back to the thought, coming to it roundabout and making it new and as his own, letting it be decided that each of them would take their father a pomegranate from the tree in the yard.

They went to the kitchen door. The

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swamp fog had risen suddenly. They saw their mother standing in the lot while their uncle hitched the horse to the wagon. Leaving the steps, Jim climbed to the first crotch of the pomegranate tree. The reddest fruits were on the top branches. He worked his way up higher. The fog was now curling up out of the swamp, making gray mountains and rivers in the air and strange ghost shapes. Landmarks disappeared in the billows, or half-seen, they bewildered the sight, and an eye could so little mark the known or strange that a befuddlement took hold of the mind, like the visitations sailors beheld in the fogs of Okeechobee. Jim could not find the ground. He seemed to have climbed into the mountains. The light was unnatural and dark, and the pines were blue and dark over the mountains. A voice cried out of the fog: "Are worms gnawen you that you skin up a pomegranate tree at this hour? Don't I feed you enough?"

The boy worked his way down. At the foot of the tree he met his mother. She squatted and put her arm around him, her voice tight and quivering, and he felt tears on her face.

"We ain't come to the shame yet of you and Dan'l hunten your food off trees and grass. People seein' you gnawen on the road will say Jim Cameron's sons are starved, foragen like cattle of the field."

"I were getten the pomegranates for papa," said the boy, resigned to his mother's concern. She stood up when he said this, holding him in front of her skirts. In a while she said:

"I guess we won't take any, Jim. . . . But I'm proud it come to you to take your papa somethen."

Then after a silence, the boy said: "Hit were Dan'l it come to, Mamma."

Then she took his hand, not looking down, and in her throat, as if her bosom, she repeated:

"Hit were a fine thought and I'm right proud . . . though today we won't take anything. . . ."

"I guess there's better pomegranates in Czardis where we are goen—"

"There's no better pomegranates in Czardis than right here over your head," she said grimly. "If pomegranates were needed, we would take him his own. . . . You are older'n Dan'l, Jim. When we get to the place we are goen, you won't know your papa after so long. He will be pale and he won't be as bright as you recollect. So don't labor him with questions . . . but speak when it behooves you and let him see you are upright."

When the horse was harnessed and all was ready for the departure, the sons were seated on a shallow bed of hay in the back of the wagon and the mother took the driver's seat alone. The uncle had argued for having the top up over the seat, but she refused the shelter, remarking that she had always driven under the sky and would do it still today. He gave in silently and got upon the seat of his own wagon, which took the road

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first, their wagon following. This was strange and the sons asked:

"Why don't we all ride in Uncle Holly's wagon?"

But their mother made no reply.

For several miles they traveled in silence through their own part of the woods, meeting no one. The boys whispered a little to themselves, but their mother and their uncle sat without speaking, nor did they turn their heads to look back. At last the narrow road they were following left the woods and came out to the highway and it was seen that other wagons besides their own were going to Czardis. And as they got farther along, they began to meet many other people going to the town, and the boys asked their mother what day it was. It was Wednesday.

And then they asked her why so many wagons were going along the road if it wasn't Saturday and a market day. When she told them to be quiet, they settled down to watching the people go by. Some of them were faces that were strange and some were neighbors who lived in other parts of the woods. Some who passed them stared in silence and some went by looking straight to the front. But there were none of them who spoke, for their mother turned her eyes neither right nor left, but drove the horse on like a woman in her sleep. All was silent as the wagons passed, except the squeaking of the wheels and the thud of the horses' hooves on the dry, packed sand.

At the edge of the town the crowds increased and their wagon got lost in the press of people. All were moving in one direction.

Finally they were going along by a high brick wall on top of which ran a barbed-wire fence. Farther along the way, in the middle of the wall, was a tall, stone building with many people in front. There were trees along the outside of the wall and in the branches of one of the trees Daniel saw a man. He was looking over the brick wall down into the courtyard. All the wagons were stopping here and hitching through the grove in front of the building. But their Uncle Holly's wagon and their own drove on, making way slowly as through a crowd at a fair, for under the trees knots of men were gathered, talking in undertone. Daniel pulled at his mother's skirts and whispered:

"What made that man climb up that tree?"

Again she told him to be quiet.

"We're not to talk today," said Jim. "Papa is sick and we're not to make him worse." But his high, thin voice made his mother turn cold. She looked back and saw he had grown pale and still, staring at the iron-barred windows of the building. When he caught her gaze, his chin began to quiver and she turned back front to dodge the knowledge of his eyes.

For the two wagons had stopped now and the uncle got down and left them sitting alone while he went to the door of the building and talked with a man standing there. The crowd fell silent, staring at their mother.

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"See, Jim, all the men up the trees!" Daniel whispered once more, leaning close in to his brother's side.

"Hush, Dan'l. Be still."

The young boy obeyed this time, falling into a bewildered stare at all the things about him he did not understand, for in all the trees along the brick wall men began to appear, perched high in the branches, and on the roof of a building across the way stood other men, all gaping at something in the yard back of the wall.

Their uncle returned and hitched his horse to a ring in one of the trees. Then he hitched their mother's horse and all of them got out and stood on the ground in a huddle. The walls of the building rose before them. Strange faces at the barred windows laughed aloud and called down curses at the men below.

Now they were moving, with a wall of faces on either side of them, their uncle going first, followed by their mother who held to each of them by a hand. They went up the steps of the building. The door opened and their uncle stepped inside. He came back in a moment and all of them went in and followed a man down a corridor and into a bare room with two chairs and a wooden bench. A man in a black robe sat on one of the chairs, and in front of him on the bench, leaning forward looking down between his arms, sat their father. His face was lean and gray, which made him look very tall. But his hair was black, and his eyes were blue and mild and strange as he stood up and held the two sons against his body while he stooped his head to kiss their mother. The man in black left the room and walked up and down outside in the corridor. A second stranger stood in the doorway with his back to the room. The father picked up one of the sons and then the other in his arms and looked at them and leaned their faces on his own. Then he sat down on the bench and held them against him. Their mother sat down by them and they were all together.

A few low words were spoken and then a silence fell over them all. And in a while the parents spoke a little more and touched one another. But the bare stone floor and the stone walls and the unaccustomed arms of their father hushed the sons with the new and strange. And when the time had passed, the father took his watch from his pocket:

"I'm goen to give you my watch, Jim. You are the oldest. I want you to keep it till you are a grown man. . . . And I want you to always do what mamma tells you. . . . I'm goen to give you the chain, Dan'l. . . ."

The younger brother took the chain, slipped out of his father's arms, and went to his mother with it. He spread it out on her knee and began to talk to her in a whisper. She bent over him, and again all of them in the room grew silent.

A sudden sound of marching was heard in the corridor. The man rose and took his sons in his arms, holding them abruptly. But their uncle, who had been standing with the man in

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the doorway, came suddenly and took them and went out and down through the big doorway by which they had entered the building. As the doors opened to let them pass, the crowd gathered around the steps and pressed forward to look inside. The older boy cringed in his uncle's arms. His uncle turned and stood with his back to the crowd. Their mother came through the doors. The crowd fell back. Again through a passageway of gazing eyes, they reached the wagons. This time they sat on the seat beside their mother. Leaving their uncle and his wagon behind, they started off on the road that led out of town.

"Is papa coming home with Uncle Holly?" Jim asked in a still voice.

His mother nodded her head, but she did not speak.

Reaching the woods once more and the silence he knew, Daniel whispered to his brother:

"We got a watch and chain instead, Jim."

But Jim neither answered nor turned his eyes.

"Q"

How the Sergeant Was Fooled

One Saturday afternoon a short time ago, a little sad-eyed boy, with dirt on his chin and a tear on his nose, called at one of the police stations and asked if he could be sent to the Reform School, he being a homeless waif. As he had committed no offense, he was told that he had better go to the workhouse, but he replied that his brother was at the Reform School and he'd rather go there. He didn't want to go out and steal anything, or smash someone's plate glass window, and his anxiety to go touched the heart of a gentleman who had called on business. He consulted with the sergeant and then said to the lad:

"I guess we can fix it. I'm going to leave my wallet on the desk, and the sergeant and I will go upstairs. If you take the wallet it will be stealing, and you will be sent to the Reform School."

The wallet was left, the men went upstairs for a moment, and when they came down, the boy was nowhere in sight; neither was the wallet, containing $16.

The lad and the money are still missing.

—AMERICANA (*circa 1890*)

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WINNER OF A THIRD PRIZE

When Jimmy Yaffe sent us his newest Mom story, he made a few comments we would like to pass on to you. He thought his new story about Mom was a big step forward to the fullest possible realization of Mom's character. There seems to have crept into the story a kind of emotional connection between the case Mom solves and her own life. It isn't that Mom knows personally any of the people in the case (excepting, of course, her son Davie and his colleague, Inspector Millner, "the oldest and most eligible bachelor on the Homicide Squad"); it's that somehow the case itself seems to reflect Mom's own life — and this interrelationship, this integration, makes for a unity of tone and a harmony of elements seldom achieved in any short story. Jimmy Yaffe thought the new story had a depth — of feeling and character — that previous Mom stories had lacked. We agree. "Mom in the Spring" is also the brightest, the cheeriest, the Springiest of all the Mom stories so far.

MOM IN THE SPRING

by JAMES YAFFE

IT WAS REALLY A BEAUTIFUL SPRING. I guess that's why it occurred to my wife Shirley and me that my mother ought to get married again.

"After all," I said, "the early fifties isn't so old. Why, Mom is livelier than the average girl of thirty. And I hate to think of her all alone, up there in that apartment in the Bronx."

"All right," said Shirley with a woman's usual brisk, businesslike approach to such matters, "who will we introduce her to?"

There was one inevitable answer to that question. Inspector Millner, of course. He was the oldest and most eligible bachelor on the Homicide Squad — that's my job, by the way, I'm a detective with Homicide — and he had all the right qualifications. He wasn't too bad-looking — sort of tall, thin, and awkward maybe, but Mom would like that much better than the slick, greasy, overgroomed type. In manner he was rather mournful and shy and unassertive — which would give Mom plenty of opportunity to manage him and baby him in turn. He was Jewish — Mom wouldn't feel comfortable with a man who wasn't Jewish. How could such a man understand her jokes? Best of all, he and Mom had an interest in common. Crime, that is. For I can hardly begin

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to count up all the murder cases which Mom has solved for me over the dinner table on Friday nights.

"So what's the first step?" I said to Shirley.

The first step, apparently, was to bring the romantic couple together. For this purpose a little innocent lying was necessary. Mom was told that Inspector Millner was a poor lonely bachelor who was sick of restaurant food, and dying to taste one of her home-cooked dinners. Inspector Millner was told that Mom was a poor lonely widow who was sick of cooking for herself and dying to show off her pot-roast to a nice appreciative gentleman. The upshot was, the following Friday night Shirley and I brought Inspector Millner up to the Bronx with us for dinner.

We were a little worried about the impression that Mom would make on him. Mom is such a blunt, direct sort of person, sometimes she upsets people who aren't used to her. If the President of the United States himself were coming to dinner, I believe that Mom would receive him in the same plain house dress, feed him the same noodle soup, and tell him her opinion of his administration in the same sharp, sarcastic manner.

Well, right from the start Shirley and I were pleasantly surprised. Inspector Millner wasn't the President. From Mom's point of view, he was much better than the President. He was a shy man with sad eyes, and all her life Mom had been a pushover for sad eyes. Poor Papa's photograph is proof of this. And so, two minutes after Inspector Millner stepped into the apartment, Mom's expression softened. There was almost a smile underneath her frown. Her handshake was definitely gracious. She spoke as sharp as ever to me, and as poisonously sweet as ever to Shirley, but when she turned to Inspector Millner she suddenly became the perfect hostess, full of consideration for her guest's comfort and full of interest in his conversation.

During dinner the evening reached its high point. The talk drifted, naturally, to homicide. Mom asked me what was the latest case I was working on, and she was delighted to hear that Inspector Millner and I were currently working on the same case. "It's a good thing for my crazy son," she said, "the influence of a sensible older man."

But Inspector Millner didn't look delighted at all. "The things that people will do to each other," he said. "To their fellow human beings. Thirty-two years on the force, and it still amazes me."

Mom laughed. "Fifty-two years in the Bronx, and *nothing* amazes me!"

"Terrible, terrible," said Inspector Millner. "That any man — You tell her about it, Dave. It burns me up just to think of it — I'll get all mixed up."

I saw Mom turn a quick look of sympathy on Inspector Millner — at which Shirley and I exchanged significant glances. Then I started in.

"The thing that makes us feel espe-

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cially bad," I said, "is that we were warned about this crime ahead of time. About a week ago this couple came to us — Edward Winters and his wife Edith. Man in his late thirties, thin and pasty-faced, horn-rimmed glasses, weak and sort of fussy manner. Woman a little younger, small but very cool and calm and dominating. Obviously has her husband completely under her thumb. The sort of relationship that makes a man cynical about marriage —"

I caught a look from Shirley at this. So I added hastily, "That is, some marriages. Mostly, of course, marriage is the most wonderful institution in life, and nobody should be without it."

"So go on with the story," Mom said, and there was a little glitter in her eye which pulled me up short for a moment. Was it possible, I wondered, that she had some inkling of what Shirley and I were up to? But that's silly, I told myself; she couldn't suspect a thing.

"This Mr. and Mrs. Winters," I went on, "were worried about their old Aunt Margaret. Old Aunt Margaret, they explained, was in her late fifties. She was a small, delicate, slightly faded lady who had never got married. She lived by herself in an old two-story private house just off Fifth Avenue, and her only family in the world was her nephew Edward and his wife Edith. She was devoted to them, they said, and they were devoted to her. They had dinner with the old lady two or three times every week. She took them with her to the theater. They chose her clothes for her, and remembered her birthday, and generally made her life worth living. That's their story, anyway."

"You're leaving out the money," Mom said.

I looked up at Mom, astonished. And I saw that Inspector Millner was looking astonished, too.

"The fact that this nice delicate Aunt Margaret had a lot of money," Mom said. "And her nephew and his wife don't have so much money. This fact you left out."

"Mom, how did you guess that?" I said.

"Guess? Who guesses?" Mom glared at me. "You told this to me. In-between the lines you told me. A woman lives in a two-story private house off Fifth Avenue — this is a woman with money. When it comes to rents and taxes, Fifth Avenue isn't the Bronx."

"But the nephew and his wife," said Inspector Millner. "How did you know that they *don't* have any money?"

"What Davie said — 'she took them with her to the theater.' The usual procedure is, loving nephews and their wives are the ones who take the poor old aunt to the theater. This way it's pretty certain Aunt Margaret was buying the tickets."

"Smart," said Inspector Millner, bobbing his head: "Practically professional."

"She was buying the tickets, all

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right," I said. "In fact, the Winters pair weren't in the office five minutes before I had them pegged — they were sponging off their aunt. Winters doesn't seem to do anything in particular by way of making a living. He calls himself an architect, but he admits that he hasn't built any houses lately. He devotes his time to working on this complicated plan of his for tearing down and rebuilding New York City. His wife doesn't have any money of her own — she's a girl from the Mid-West who worked as a secretary before she got married. And yet, they're well-dressed, they've got a nice apartment in the East Sixties, and they don't show signs of stinting themselves on anything. Where does the money come from? There's no other place but Aunt Margaret.

"So, anyway, they came to Homicide all upset over Aunt Margaret. They were positive that somebody was out to kill her. In fact, they could even tell us this somebody's name. A tobacco planter from Louisville, Kentucky, named Thomas Keith."

"Just a minute," said Shirley, who occasionally likes to show Mom that she can do the detecting trick herself. "There's a discrepancy in what you said. If Aunt Margaret was all alone in the world — a timid old maid whose life revolved around her nephew and his wife — how on earth did she ever meet this Kentucky tobacco planter?"

"Now that's a simple question," said Mom, who likes to show Shirley that the detecting trick isn't as easy as some people think. "An old maid who lives alone, with nobody in her life except a couple of *schnorrer* relatives — this smells of only one thing. Letters to the personal columns. Lonely Hearts advertisements. There's a certain type nice, weak-minded woman that always breaks out eventually in letters."

"Amazing!" said the Inspector.

"That's just what happened, Mom," I said. "A few months ago the Winters couple went to visit Aunt Margaret in her house. While she was out of the room they happened to notice this letter lying on the floor where it had dropped accidentally. It was a letter from this Thomas Keith. They confronted Aunt Margaret with it, and she confessed the whole thing. She had put her name in the personal column of some magazine — one of those messages about a 'refined intelligent lady anxious to correspond with a cultured, middle-aged gentleman.' And so on — you know the type. This Keith answered her ad. By the time she told her nephew and his wife about these letters, she and Keith had become very chummy indeed. He was writing her what a deep influence she had on his life, and she was glowing and sparkling like a young girl at her first dance."

"And those no-good relatives of hers didn't like this?" said Mom, looking particularly sour. "They don't think a woman over fifty is entitled to any joy in her life?"

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Shirley and I couldn't help exchanging glances at this — glances of triumph almost, premature as they might have been.

"They certainly didn't like it," I went on. "Right away they started to put the pressure on Aunt Margaret. They told her it was silly, it was childish, it was dangerous; that he was only after her money, he was making a fool of her, he might be planning to do her some harm. But the more they worked on her, the more she hardened against them. Ordinarily she was an unaggressive, easily dominated lady, but her relationship with this Keith, even though she hadn't ever set eyes on him, seemed to be terribly important to her. She told her nephew and his wife that she wouldn't stop writing to Keith, no matter what. This was the first real friendship she'd ever had in her life. *They* had friends of their own, so why shouldn't *she*?".

"Good for Aunt Margaret," said Mom, nodding vigorously.

"Good for Aunt Margaret," said Inspector Millner, like a small echo.

"What's more," I went on, "the opposition of her nephew and his wife made Aunt Margaret write even warmer and friendlier letters to Keith than ever. And pretty soon a hint of matrimony began to show itself between the lines. Edward and Edith Winters were in a fury. There must've been some pretty heated scenes with their aunt. They claim they didn't raise their voices to her — but that Edith Winters looks like she could do more damage with one quiet word than most people can do with a whole bombardment of shouts. Finally, after one particularly sentimental letter from Keith, the Winters couple came to us.

"They wanted us to put Keith in jail. Men like that are menaces, they said. Swindlers, confidence men, and even worse — potential murderers. It seems that Edward Winters's own mother, who passed away a while back, was victimized by one of these Lonely Hearts ads about twenty-five years ago. Some swindler took her for a lot of money, and she never got over the disillusionment. All in all, this has made her son especially bitter on the subject. But if you ask me, his bitterness also had a little bit to do with his reluctance to share Aunt Margaret's fortune with some Kentucky tobacco planter.

"Well, we had to tell Winters and his wife that we couldn't help them. Keith lived in a different state — no crime had been committed — and Aunt Margaret had a perfect right to correspond with anybody she pleased. Edith Winters got very annoyed at this. She and her husband had sneaked one of Keith's letters out of Aunt Margaret's desk, and she pulled it out now just to prove to us what a phony he was. It was pretty phony-sounding, all right — but there still wasn't anything we could do."

"How was it phony?" Mom said. "Give me a for instance."

I thought that over a minute. "Well — it was full of high-flown flattery and super-Southern expressions, like

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'my little Magnolia blossom' and 'star of my life' and so on. It was written in a kind of small, spidery old-man's hand, with the letters all fancy and full of curleycues — you know, that old-fashioned style of penmanship.

"But the worst part of the letter was in the P.S. For a minute he dropped the 'heart's delight' and 'my own little angel' line and mentioned specifically how he was looking forward to actually meeting her face to face in the near future. 'The last time I visited your great city,' he wrote, 'was in the year 1929, and I was alone and my heart was empty. I saw the Statue of Liberty and to me it was only hollow stone. I looked down from the top of your Empire State Building, and spread below me were only rooftops and smokestacks. I strolled through your Central Park, and the trees spoke not a word to me. But soon I will come again, and my heart will be full, and you will be on my arm, and New York will become a city of magic.' Honest to God, Mom, that's exactly what this man wrote. And poor Aunt Margaret fell for it hook, line, and sinker."

Mom shrugged. "This is typical man's reasoning. The men give out the fancy flattery, the men go wild from disappointment if the women don't fall for this fancy flattery — and as soon as the women *do* fall, the men start sneering and saying, 'Those dumb women!' "

"All men aren't like that," Shirley felt she had to put in. "Some men have the greatest respect and admiration for women."

Mom gave Shirley a smile — another of those quick smiles that made me wonder just how much she suspected. But my wonder didn't last long, because Mom was pressing me to go on with the story.

"Well, Mr. and Mrs. Winters stormed out of the office," I said. "If we wouldn't help them, they said, they'd do something about the situation themselves. We found out later what they did. Edward Winters took the plane that night to Louisville, to talk to this Thomas Keith and warn him off. He couldn't find Keith's number in the phone book, though — you'll find out why in a minute. So Winters flew back to New York in the morning. And when he saw his aunt that afternoon, she was terribly excited. She had received a telegram from Keith. It came collect — collect, mind you! Can you imagine the nerve of the man? He wired that he was coming to New York that same night 'to claim his dearest heart's delight forever.'

"Well, the old lady was in quite a state over this. Evidently she never expected her friendship to go quite so far. Now that it had come to the point of actually marrying the man, she seemed to lose her nerve. She was scared and upset. She pleaded with her nephew and his wife to have dinner with her that night, and to stay with her in the house till Keith arrived. They waited till after midnight — so the Winters couple tell

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us — but Keith didn't show up. Finally, the Winters couple left.

"In the morning they called up Aunt Margaret. No answer on the phone. So they went over to her house, found the front door unlocked, and discovered her body on the living-room floor. She had been strangled to death with one of her own scarves. Keith's telegram was clutched in her right hand. It was pretty clear what had happened. Her Southern Romeo had showed up after the nephew and his wife left. He told her that he had come to marry her. She told him that she had changed her mind and didn't want to marry him — remember how upset she was at receiving his telegram? So he killed her in a fit of anger — and maybe hoping to find some money in the apartment. And there you are — that's our case."

We were all silent for a while, eating our pot-roast. Finally Mom gave a nod of her head. "So what are you up to now?" she said. "Have you got the police from Kentucky running all over the place, looking for this Thomas Keith?"

"That's all over with," I said. "We extradited Keith yesterday, and we've got him in jail right now."

"He's an animal," said Inspector Millner. "Some people just aren't human."

But Mom was staring at me hard. "You mean you actually found him? There was actually a fellow by that name?"

"Oh, I see what you mean, Mom," I said, with a laugh. "Naturally Keith was a phony name — he used it just to sign those letters to Aunt Margaret. But we located him easy enough by his photograph."

"Photograph!" Mom sat up straight and gave me her most exasperated look. "Now why are you hiding the important facts, if you please? Do you think maybe it would be too easy for me if you told me everything? Where, if I may ask, did you find this photograph?"

"In the old lady's bedroom. Underneath her pillow, to be exact. She actually slept with this man's photograph under her pillow. We checked with the files, and sure enough it was the photograph of an old-time confidence man named Sam Kidd — same thick black mustache, same highly polished hair. Used to be active all over the East. He was arrested in New York in 1929, and served fifteen years in prison down South. After he got out, he presumably went straight. The authorities kept their eye on him, of course. They told us he was in the haberdashery business and had never gone up North again. But of course, he must've been working this Lonely Hearts racket on the side."

"That's the type swindler he was back in 1929?" Mom said. "The Lonely Hearts type?"

"Among other types," I said. "He's built for it, Mom. You should see him. He's older than our official photograph shows, of course — nowadays the mustache is gray and the hair is white. But he's just as oily and smooth as ever. Not hard to understand why

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a lonely old lady would fall for him."

"It shows how dangerous it is to be a lonely old lady," Shirley put in.

"That's a fact," said Mom. "People are always trying to make matches for you, and other such dangers."

While Shirley fidgeted, Mom turned back to me. "And you found this fellow living in Kentucky? Right there in Looie's Ville?"

"No, not in Louisville. I admit that's one of the weaknesses in our case. This Sam Kidd's been running a haberdashery store in Atlanta, Georgia. He claims he's never been to Louisville in his life. He says he never heard of Aunt Margaret or her family. And unfortunately the girl in the Louisville telegraph office didn't particularly notice the man who sent that wire to Aunt Margaret. Also unfortunately, the handwriting experts won't say definitely that the letters are in his handwriting. To them it looks like a disguised handwriting. On the other hand, we got one break — Kidd has no alibi for the night of the murder. He could very easily have flown to New York, killed Aunt Margaret, then flown right back to Atlanta again."

"It's a good case," said Inspector Millner. "God knows I wouldn't want to see a man punished for something he didn't do. But this dirty dog — that poor harmless lady — it's definitely a good case."

"It's a wonderful case," Mom said. "The only trouble with it is, it don't have much connection with the truth."

By this time in my life I am used to these sudden, upsetting pronouncements from Mom. I take them in my stride. I shrug or I smile in a superior way. Deep down I may be groaning to myself. I may be telling myself, "Not again — she isn't going to do this to me again!" But this is deep down. On the surface I remain cool and unperturbed.

Poor Inspector Millner, though, was having his first experience with Mom's pronouncements. Cool and unperturbed were definitely not the words for him at that moment. "But I don't understand," he said. "How can you say — I mean, what makes you — I mean, you seem so sure of yourself —"

"Sure? Who's sure?" Mom said. "I got my ideas. But first I'm interested in the answer to four small questions. After that I'll be sure."

Inspector Millner looked even more confused. "Four questions? I don't follow. What four questions?"

I hurried to his rescue. "It's nothing. Mom likes to ask questions. She takes an interest in these things. Just sort of polite curiosity —" But really I was terribly anxious. Mom's "small questions" have a way of getting wild and woolly sometimes — and I didn't want Inspector Millner to get the idea that she was out of her head. "Go ahead, Mom," I said, my heart sinking. "Ask your questions."

She turned to me, very businesslike. "Question One. These letters that Aunt Margaret got from this Thomas Keith — what was the postmark on

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them? Did they definitely come from Looie's Ville?"

The question wasn't wild at all — it actually made sense. I breathed a sigh of relief, and I noticed Shirley doing likewise. "I see what you're getting at, Mom," I said. "Suppose Sam Kidd didn't mail those letters from Louisville at all. Suppose he mailed them right from Atlanta. The postmarks would show that, and we'd have very strong evidence against him. I'm afraid it's a blind alley, though. Aunt Margaret didn't save the envelopes of those letters. The Winters couple told us that she threw them all away."

"Good," Mom said. "I'm glad to hear it."

"Glad to hear it? But Mom, that's not good news at all —"

But Mom was pushing on. "Question Two. Aunt Margaret was like a lot of old maids, wasn't she, very neat and tidy? She kept her place and herself clean like a new pin, didn't she?"

This made me a little uneasy again. Because this second question didn't make quite as much sense as the first. Fortunately, though, Mom was right. "Yes, she *was* the neat, orderly type," I said. "We could tell that when we searched her house."

"Question Three," Mom said. "Is it possible that this no-good nephew, aside from the fact that he's always been living off his aunt's money, is also a big tightwad? He's the stingy type, am I right?"

My uneasiness grew. I laughed, trying to pass off Mom's question as a joke. "Well, I don't see what bearing that has —"

"You don't have to see. Only answer."

"Well — it's actually a coincidence that you asked that question. We talked to the servants, neighbors, local tradesmen, and so on — the people who came in contact with Winters and his wife. They *did* say that he was well-known in the neighborhood for his stinginess. Willing enough to spend money on his own comfort, you understand, but small and mean in his dealings with other people." Even as I said this, I could see the bewildered look on Inspector Millner's face. "What's your last question, Mom?" I said, putting a slight emphasis on the word "last."

"Question Four and Last," Mom said. "In these letters that Aunt Margaret got from Thomas Keith — there was a lot of words underlined?"

"Underlined!" In spite of my concern over Inspector Millner, I couldn't help gaping at this. "Underlined — now how the —"

"Underlined," Mom said impatiently. "With lines under them. All of a sudden my English is no good?"

"Yes, there was lots of underlining," I said. "All through those letters. But Mom, I just don't understand —"

Inspector Millner leaned forward and spoke to Mom in a slow earnest voice, the way you speak to sick people or to children. "Do you think it's some sort of code?" he said. "I mean, foreign agents or something, and they underline the key words?"

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"Code?" Mom turned a look of wry amusement on him. "I suppose you could call it this. To some people it might be a code."

This remark was so completely inexplicable that the rest of us could do nothing but fidget and look embarrassed. Finally Shirley broke the silence. "Now what, Mother? Now that you've asked your questions, are you willing to admit that the police have the right man?"

"The right man!" Mom gave a snort. "The right man is walking around free right now."

It was one of Mom's usual bombshells. And we all reacted appropriately. Inspector Millner was especially bewildered. "But what have you found out? We didn't tell you anything that we didn't know already. I really don't mean to contradict —"

"I didn't find out anything that you didn't know already," Mom said. "But I found it out with my head, not with my flat feet." An instant later she turned an apologetic smile on Inspector Millner. "I'm not referring to *your* flat feet, naturally. Only the younger men —" Her apologetic smile turned into a sharp look, directed at me.

"All right, Mom," I said, with a long sigh — because I was convinced that her chances with Inspector Millner were completely ruined by this time. I was sure she had scared off the poor man forever. "Let's hear it and get it over with. What's the solution to the murder? Where did the stupid police go wrong?"

"You went wrong," Mom said, "by forgetting the most important factor — Mr. Feinberg, the butcher."

Inspector Millner blinked. "But please," he said in a feeble voice. "Who's Mr. Feinberg, the butcher? He hasn't even appeared in the case up till now —"

"What about Feinberg, the butcher?" I said to Mom, very quietly.

"I'm explaining," Mom said. "During the last war, do you remember the meat shortage? Poor Feinberg the butcher, for a long time he didn't have no chopped hamburger to sell to his customers. What complaining we heard from him! One day some woman comes into the store and tells him an interesting story she just read in a history book — how the French butchers in the days of Napoleon's Boneypart, when there was also a meat shortage, used to kill the cats and serve them up for hamburger. Feinberg listened very thoughtful to this story. And the next morning, when we came in to buy our meat, what a surprise, he had a whole new supply of hamburger for us! And also what a surprise, the two cats that usually crawled around his store weren't crawling around no more! Believe me, there wasn't many of us buying Feinberg's hamburger that morning. Like we said to each other, 'Coincidences is very nice, but some of them are maybe a little too convenient for a good digestion.'"

"And this long and elaborate story," Shirley said, "is supposed to have some connection with this murder?"

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"I think I see it," said Inspector Millner hesitantly. "Feinberg the butcher is really —"

Mom nodded with tremendous approval. "A smart policeman," she said. "Who would believe it? I finally met a smart policeman. So now it's as plain as my nose, isn't it? For instance, take the telegram that Aunt Margaret got from this Keith in Louie's Ville. A collect telegram, didn't you tell me? Here is this swindler who wants to marry an old maid for her money. It's part of his plan to make her believe he's a big tobacco planter with plenty money of his own. Until he's finally got her sewed up in the license, can he afford to drop this act? No, he can't. So is he going to be fool enough to send her a *collect* telegram?"

"Of course he isn't!" Inspector Millner cried. "Why didn't I see that right away?"

"At least you're a big enough man to admit it," Mom said. "But this isn't the only evidence. Take the photograph, for instance. You find it under Aunt Margaret's pillow. It's a photograph of this Keith which he's supposed to have sent her in one of his letters. But here's the important fact — it's a photograph which was taken twenty-five years ago, before he went to jail in 1929. Same black hair, same black mustache — didn't you say so yourself? And today he's a man with white hair and a gray mustache. Now a swindler who's planning to show up in person and marry a rich old maid, does he send her a twenty-five-year-old photograph? What happens when she finally meets him and sees what he really looks like? Big disappointment. Maybe the whole wedding falls through. Excuse me, he don't take such a chance. So the answer is, he never sent her this photograph at all."

"All right, Mom," I said. "This seems to prove that Sam Kidd didn't —"

"More evidence," Mom said, ignoring me. "We proved that Sammy Kidd didn't send that telegram from Louie's Ville. We also proved that he didn't send his photograph to Aunt Margaret. Now we'll prove that he didn't write any of those letters at all."

"Yes, of course he didn't," Inspector Millner broke in, quite excited. "It's been bothering me all along, but I couldn't put my finger on it. The Empire State Building —"

"Aha!" said Mom, raising her finger. "I was waiting if somebody would catch the Empire State Building."

I was more confused than ever. "What about it, Mom?"

"In that letter you read us," Mom said, "that letter from this Keith, you remember how he talks about going up to the top of the Empire State Building and looking down at the rooftops?"

"But that's a normal thing, Mom. People do it every day."

"Exactly. People do it every day — nowadays. A person who lives in New York, and who always lived in New York, such a person thinks of this as a normal thing. Us New Yorkers, we

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take it for granted, the Empire State Building. If we wanted to make up a phony-baloney story about a Southerner remembering his last trip to New York, naturally we'd put in the Empire State Building. What we don't think of is, the Empire State Building wasn't with us since the beginning of the world."

"1931," Inspector Millner put in. "The Empire State Building wasn't finished till 1931. And Keith, in his letter, says that his last visit to New York was in 1929."

"So there it is, in words from one syllable," Mom said. "This Sammy Kidd, he really *was* in New York for the last time in 1929. Since then he's been in jail and down in Atlanta, Georgie. So why would he have to tell a lie about visiting the Empire State Building on his last trip to New York? He could just as easy tell the honest truth about that trip. But this letter was written by somebody who lived in New York right through till today, and who forgot when the Empire State Building was finished."

"But Mom," I cried, unable to stand it any longer. "You've proved that Sam Kidd didn't write those letters — and that means that he wasn't the one who killed the old lady. But who *did* write the letters? Who *did* kill her?"

"Feinberg, the butcher!" Inspector Millner put in trimphantly.

I stared at him, half astounded, half delighted. My God, he was beginning to talk and think like Mom already!

"Feinberg, the butcher, is right," Mom said, nodding her head approvingly. "Who was it that *did* live in New York City right through till now? Who was it that could get his hands easily on a twenty-five-year-old photograph of a Lonely Hearts swindler — because his own mother was writing to such a swindler twenty-five years ago? And it was this old photograph which he dug up out of the attic or the basement and planted under the old lady's pillow for the purpose of fooling the police —"

"I see it, I see it," I said.

"— and who was it," Mom went on, "that we know was definitely in Louie's Ville, by his own confession, at the time this telegram was sent to Aunt Margaret? And the biggest evidence yet, who is it that would be most likely to send this telegram collect? Who was a well-known tightwad? Who was small and mean in his dealings — according to your own words, Davie? Who had such a bad stinginess, and such a strong habit of sponging from Aunt Margaret, that he couldn't resist the temptation to send a collect telegram?"

"It's the nephew, Mom," I cried out. "He invented this mythical Thomas Keith himself. He answered Aunt Margaret's ad in the personal column. He wrote all those letters. He went down to Louisville — not to talk to Keith as he claimed, but simply to send the telegram. Then he killed Aunt Margaret that night, put the photograph under her pillow, and 'discovered' the body next morning. A

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pretty ingenious frame-up — he not only pins his crime on a scapegoat, he actually creates that scapegoat right out of his own head."

But Inspector Millner was frowning and shaking his head. "But that's not the whole story. It wasn't the nephew alone. There's the evidence of the handwriting."

Mom was so pleased with him that she laughed out loud. "Good for you. The handwriting, naturally. Small and spidery, you said, Davie — like an old man. But small and spidery is also like a woman's handwriting. And the letters were fancy and curleycued. Definitely something a woman would do. And a lot of the words were underlined — a typical woman's trick. Didn't I read it in a history novel once, how one of those Queens from England — Queen Victorious, wasn't it? — had the habit from underlining the words in her letters?"

"The nephew's wife, of course," I said. "I should've seen that all along. She's the strong-minded one — her husband's strictly a mouse. *She* wrote those letters. She thought up the whole scheme. I'll bet she was even the one who did the actual —" This thought made me shudder a little, and I broke off.

"Feinberg, the butcher, all over again," Mom said, with satisfaction. "For years and years the nephew and his wife are living off their aunt. For years and years they keep her cut off so she's got nobody else in the world to give her money to. All of a sudden somebody else comes into her life, and it looks like she might even get married to this somebody else, and her money isn't so safe for this nephew and his wife no more. So all of a sudden Aunt Margaret gets killed — and what a surprise, the nephew and his wife, being her only relatives, have got their hands on her money for good! Believe me, Davie, this is a load of chopped hamburger that positively has a cat in it. And this cat, I think, is big enough even for the New York City Homicide Squad."

Inspector Millner started to his feet. "I think maybe I'd better call Homicide. We can't let that pair run loose —"

"Just a minute!"

This time it was Shirley who spoke up. There was a sharpness in her voice which made Inspector Millner take his seat again, and which made the rest of us turn and look at her.

"One thing isn't clear yet," Shirley said. "When old Aunt Margaret received those letters from Thomas Keith, they must've had Louisville postmarks on them. A New York City postmark would have aroused her suspicions. So how did Edward and Edith Winters arrange to send those letters from Louisville?"

"Yes, how about that, Mom?" I said. And we all turned to Mom and waited for her answer.

A strange thing happened. Instead of settling this question with a few masterful words, Mom suddenly grew very uneasy. A touch of red came to her cheeks. She lowered her eyes and mumbled, "Time for dessert, every-

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body pass in their plates, please."

"No you don't, Mother," said Shirley, a gleam of triumph in her eye. "Answer my question."

Mom hesitated a moment, then she looked up at us. And the expression on her face gave me a start. It was so sad — so sad and miserable. "Mom, what is it?" I said. "Are you sick or something?"

Mom shook her head, and gave a sigh. "I didn't want to say it," she said. "It started off as a secret, it should stay a secret. If you want I should tell you about it, then you got to make me a promise. Every one of you, you got to promise — outside of this room tonight, it'll still be a secret."

One by one, puzzled as we were, we made that promise.

Mom gave another sigh, and then she started speaking. "It's just like my cousin Hannah's grandnephew, little Joel," she said. "Poor little boy. He was naturally shy from the start. His Mama and Papa were such big butterflies, lots of parties, but no attention for little Joel. And his big thick glasses didn't make it no easier for him. He didn't have no friends, this is the point of the story. It was a terrible shame to him. He got the idea that people was laughing at him because he was such a *schlemiel* he couldn't even find friends for himself. So what did he do, that boy? It was only human, wasn't it? He made up friends. He made up their names, their looks, their families. He told stories about the games he played with them. Such careful, realistic stories. For the benefit of other people, of course — and a little bit for the benefit of himself." Mom paused for a moment, then she finished up. "Old ladies and little children — there isn't so much difference between them."

We all stared at her. "Mom," I said, "do you mean —?"

"By yourself you should've guessed it," Mom said. "The handwriting on that letter. Certainly it was a woman's handwriting. But that fancy curley-cue business — this isn't the habit of a young modern woman, this is the habit of an old-fashioned woman. This is how we used to do it when *I* was a little girl. And the underlining, the way so many words was underlined. This isn't the type thing that a cold, unemotional woman like this Winters woman goes in for. This is the habit of a lonely, excitable woman with lots of feelings and sentimentality."

"*She wrote them to herself*," said Inspector Millner, his voice trembling a little. "She was lonely, and her nephew and his wife were always reminding her of her loneliness. So she decided to show them that she could have a real friendship of her own."

"And that's why she never showed them the envelopes," I said. "Those letters never *had* any envelopes."

"Exactly," said Mom. "And this is also why the nephew and his wife found that letter 'accidentally' on the floor. A neat, tidy lady like that Aunt Margaret, she don't leave important letters accidentally on the floor when company's coming. She *wanted* them

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to find the letter and know about her friend Keith — this was the most important part of her plan. Just like little Joel."

"But Mom," I said, thoughtfully. "She had her nephew and his wife completely fooled, didn't she? They didn't have any idea that she was writing those letters to herself, did they? They believed that there really was a man in Louisville, didn't they? So weren't they taking a big chance, planting that photograph and trying to pin the crime on that man? How could they feel sure that he wouldn't get in touch with the police, and prove that the man in the photograph wasn't him?"

"Sure they couldn't be," Mom said. "But they could be *pretty* sure. All the chances was that this fellow in Louie's Ville, when he heard about the murder, would keep as far away from the police as he could. Especially since the police had a photograph of somebody else — so why should he stick his neck out? But all right, even if he *did* stick his neck, even if he went to the police and said, 'I'm the fellow that was writing to this old lady, and that isn't my photograph you found under her pillow' — all right, it still looks suspicious for him. A confidence man who's trying to get his hands on an old lady's money, it's just possible, even if he never intended to meet the old lady personally, that he might send her *somebody else's* picture. Either way — you follow me? — it would look bad for the man from Louie's Ville, but it wouldn't look bad at all for the nephew and his wife?"

We all thought this over for a moment — and then, suddenly, a look of horror came over Inspector Millner's face. "The telegram!" he cried. "We've — that is, you've — already proved that the telegram was sent to her by her own nephew. That poor lady — imagine what she felt when she got that telegram? A telegram *from a man that she knew didn't exist!* No wonder she was so frightened and upset."

I took it up from there. "She didn't know what was happening. It was just as if her day dream had suddenly come to life before her eyes. And she was ashamed to tell the truth to her nephew and his wife."

"If only she had, if only she had," said Inspector Millner, shaking his head back and forth. "They wouldn't have done it then. They wouldn't have had any reason to do it."

"If only she had," said Mom. Her voice was soft and gentle — I hadn't heard such gentleness in her voice since I was a little boy, since I had pneumonia and Mom sat up with me all night during the crisis. "A little bit of love that was strictly her own," Mom said. "This is all she wanted in the world. And even this she couldn't have without giving up her life for it." Mom's eyes were on me, and her smile was tender. "Some people in this world just don't have the luck," she said.

For a long time we were all silent. The dessert, one of Mom's nesselrode

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pies, was waiting unnoticed. We were just as embarrased and uneasy as if old Aunt Margaret had been right there at the table with us, blushing.

A moment later the mood broke. Mom lifted her chin and laughed and said, "All right, the last five minutes didn't happen. We're back to the dessert. Kindly pass your plates, please." We passed our plates, Inspector Millner phoned Homicide, and Shirley started talking about the new Spring hats. Then Mom told a joke about her next-door neighbor, Mrs. Korngold, and the dinner ended in noise and laughter.

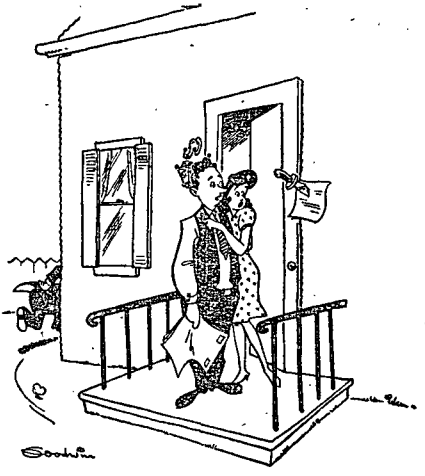
When they said goodbye that night, Mom and Inspector Millner shook hands for an unusually long time — Shirley and I were timing it. And when Mom said, "Come again — come again soon," I knew this wasn't mere politeness. Mom isn't the sort of person who goes in for mere politeness. And all the way down in the elevator, Inspector Millner kept shaking his head and saying, "A wonderful woman."

The next morning I called Mom up and fished casually for information.

"He's a swell guy, isn't he?" I said. "Inspector Millner, I mean."

"Herbie, you mean?" Mom said. "He's a nice man. He needs a little fattening up, though. A few good dinners would do it."

Shirley and I spent the rest of the morning congratulating ourselves — and planning the next steps in the campaign. As I mentioned already, it was really a beautiful Spring.



"Our subscription to Murder Mysteries has expired."

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Black Mask Magazine . . .

Albert Johnston's "Louisville Blues" is another original story for our Black Mask department. It is a tough yarn, grim and violent, and altogether an unpretty picture of life in the raw. But life is like that — all is not sweetness and light; and we think you will enjoy the pleasanter tales of detection all the more if occasionally — not too often — you take a peek at the shabbier side of living . . .

The author was born and educated in Philadelphia. He studied art seriously, writing as a hobby; now it's vice versa. As a climax to his Bohemian days, Mr. Johnston hitch-hiked from New York to San Francisco, intending to wind up in Hawaii; instead, he got sidetracked in California, settled in San Diego, and later in Hollywood. Since those earlier days, Mr. Johnston has taken a fling at almost everything in the way of vocational pursuit; he has been a gardener, artist's model, night club waiter, truckman, duster of antiques (and don't think that's easy!), assistant manager of a movie house, elevator operator, sign painter, steel worker, and eventually, back east, story analyst for RKO, 20th Century-Fox, and Columbia Pictures. If Mr. Johnston should continue to write tough stories, he certainly has his choice of material; but while there will always be a tough, realistic streak in his writing, a hard core of facing facts and calling a spade a spade, Mr. Johnston has more than one string to his bow: he won a National Theater Conference Fellowship in playwriting in 1949, and last year Crown published his first novel, PABLO'S MOUNTAIN . . .

Again we take an opportunity to invite all writers to do originals for our Black Mask section. We encourage you to explore, in the highest tradition of the hardboiled story, the seamy side of life — to illuminate, with all the artistry at your command, the dark streets of crime and punishment.

LOUISVILLE BLUES

by ALBERT JOHNSTON

THE SICK AND SHIVERING YOUNG ex-jockey sat hunched in the boxcar. The freight was speeding through a pass in the Rockies. The rumbling din inside the closed car was terrific. He thought, *You get used to everything — I could lie back and close my eyes and imagine I'm in a*

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nice warm sleeper on the Chieftain.

He wanted sleep badly; sleep, a shave, and a change of clothes so that when he got to Louisville — if he was lucky enough to get there before the band made corn-syrup out of *My Old Kentucky Home* — he could find an old pal among the rail-birds and put the bite on him without getting pinched for impersonating a scarecrow.

Yes, sleep. But he fought it, fought the lulling rumble of the rolling stock and the metronomic click-clickity-click of steel on steel beneath him. He had climbed into this foul-smelling empty just outside Elko and found it crawling with human specimens. Not since some 'bo had slid open the big side-door a few hours ago had there been a whiff of fresh air or a silver of daylight inside the car. Only darkness, stench, the droning of voices, an occasional match-flare — God, if he could sleep! But he didn't dare.

The raveled sleave, he thought; *stinks and horrors of outrageous fortune . . . There I go again. Shakespeare corrupts. She was right.*

Helen had spat at him through her $2000 pearly-white teeth: "Listen, Shakespeare, who're you kidding? You two-bit phoney, trying to make like a writer when all you've done all your life is whip goats and beetles around dirt tracks."

He winced, remembering. She'd left him not long after. But long before that there was the spill at Hialeah and the investigation by the Commission.

There was this sparrow on the rail, see? My mount sort of twisted crazy-like — it was awful, the horseflesh, the hooves. I don't remember much — only the sparrow. Maybe it wasn't a sparrow —

He had told it to them from the hospital bed. They had listened but they didn't believe him. He was ruined, through. They'd found some stuff in his locker.

After that, he'd broken the habit.

"Okay, Shakespeare. What're you going to do now?"

"Helen, maybe you'll laugh —"

"Maybe. Maybe I won't be here to laugh, Vince."

"Listen, Helen. There's something I've always wanted to do —"

She didn't laugh when he told her. For six months he wrote stories until he knew he was not even a good hack. He quit. He just couldn't stomach himself. When he told her, she seared him with nearly every foul epithet outside the dictionary. And on the day that she left, she stood there with bile working in her painted mouth and told him who the other man was, and when he heard the name a chilling hatred swept through him and he knew that if he ever slipped past the borderline, just once, he'd kill that man . . .

There were possibly twenty men in the boxcar. Since Elko he'd glimpsed a few faces, grunted a few words. He was hungry and sick and half frozen. Spring came late in the Rockies.

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Somebody wanted fresh air.

Vince turned his head and a flaring white pain bit into his eyes. The boxcar door stood open maybe a foot, two feet.

A big man, bundled in layers of shaggy sweaters, hawked and spat. Wind whipped in from the white glare.

"Snow," somebody said in the shadows. "Look at that snow!"

"Shut that damn door!"

"Antifreeze, somebody. Who's got a bottle?"

The door was shut again, and Vince relaxed. When the freight stopped for water, he'd get out of this. *I'm scum*, he told himself, *but not this kind of scum. We're in Colorado. Some town, some mountain town. I'll tell somebody my story, borrow a few bucks fare. I'll get there — I've still got four whole days.*

He began to shake. He worked his mouth, bit his lip, rubbed his unshaven cheeks. When that 'bo said "snow," it came over him. He was through with it. But it wasn't through with him. Some longing, nurtured by deep, drowsy memories, still lingered in his brain cells.

He was tempted to grope his way through the darkness and ask someone, "Got a swig, buddy? Antifreeze. I got ice in my bones" — but he'd never had a drinker's stomach.

Knees under chin, arms around knees, he sat grimly rooted to the splintery flooring and let his nerve cells run loose and the gnawing cramp work in his stomach while the giant wheels beneath him hummed and sang, *Kicked in the guts, kicked in the guts, kicked in the guts.*

Somebody struck a match five feet away.

Its fitful glare was half hidden behind cupped hands. But in the quarter of an instant before the match died and the cigarette caught flame, Vince saw the high chiaroscuroed cheekbones of the little man, the suggestion of a tiny mustache —

Vince thought, *My God, oh, my God!*

There are some things a man cannot endure. A woman's treachery is one. But how could he be sure? And how could he breathe normally while he remained unsure?

He had always known he would remember that face. It was high-boned, sculptured, somewhat like his own; but it was always highly flushed, remarkably handsome because of the ruddy flesh-tones. The black hair, too, heavily pomaded, brushed to a blue-black sheen.

That last day, when everything had crashed around him, Helen threw into his face something the man had said. She was hysterical, mocking, a drunken plugged-nickel Duse. "You know what he says? He says, *You and the little guy, you ain't got it for each other any more. But we got it, baby, you and me!* So take that into your stable and sleep with it. I've got a man this time, not a — not a —" She halted, brushing loose blonde hair from her eyes. Then she laughed

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and went on. "Oh, he's a scream, Mac's a scream. You should hear him when he imitates you shooting the bull to the track Commission — Mac used to be an actor once, he says, and you should hear him! *Gentlemen*, he says, *I cannot tell a lie. My horsie saw a sparrow, a tiny little sparrow* —"

But Vince did hear him. In his mind. And he had never forgotten.

Now he edged toward the cigarette glow, his knuckles taking a splinter. He checked himself, listening to the breathing of the man, and thought, *He could have recognized me too.*

He felt his jacket pocket. The thin bulge reassured him. He knew his man — if this was the man.

"Bud," he called.

He waited.

"Hey, buddy."

Vince caught the sound of shoes scraping rough board. The little jerk was shifting.

"Hey, Mac, got a cigarette?"

He would work in close. The match-flare might show him, but there wasn't going to be any match-flare if he could help it.

The man spoke thickly, through phlegm.

"Empty pack," he said.

"Aw, come on, pal —"

"Get back."

The growl, the guttural timbre, they weren't *his*. Vince was no longer sure, but a motor was humming in his chest, and he felt a little dizzy.

"You don't have to be sore, Mac."

No answer. Vince edged closer.

"Gimme a drag —"

"Get the hell outa here."

There was unmistakable menace in the man's voice. Why not? In this foul trap, Vince himself would have stiffened if somebody had crept up to him in the dark.

"Okay, Mac. Okay."

Vince was in an awkward position, with most of his weight on one hand. He gripped himself like a man on a clifftop. Looking into the shadows of the sealed car was like losing your eyes to the night. But another glimpse of that face would be worth anything, worth even blindness. Vince strained, but he could see nothing.

Matches — he had none. Along with the other, he'd given up smoking too. But just for now, he would smoke, do anything — for one more glimpse.

If he moved away to borrow a match, he might lose the man. His arm was crawling now with needle pricks, half paralyzed. He had to shift his position —

Then the man stirred and coughed.

At first it was a dry cough; then it grew thicker, throatier, ending in a spasm and a gasping insuck of breath.

Vince saw the glow of the cigarette move downward, ghost-fingered, and grind out sparks against the rough flooring. Then the glow was dead.

Vince spoke, "Bad cough you got there, Mac."

For a moment there was no response. Vince opened his half-frozen mouth to speak again, but a belated answer stopped him.

"Mind your own business, fella."

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"Sure, Mac," Vince said. "Sure."

"I'm not Mac."

"Oh, I call everybody Mac."

"I'm tellin' you."

"Sure, you're tellin' me," Vince shifted, moving closer, dismayed that the man's voice was not the light nasal voice he remembered. Leaning forward again, he went after him, improvising cautiously at first: "You coughing like that. Friend of mine, O'Sullivan, an actor, he had a pair of sick lungs — used to make a production out of it when he coughed. A real ham. He died coughing."

"Cut it, brother," the darkness growled.

"Tried Arizona, tried everything. Died in six months."

"I said cut it!"

"What's the matter, Mac? Something wrong in a guy trying to strike up a conversation?"

"You're bughouse."

"That's me. Bughouse Looie. Stinks and horrors of outrageous fortune —"

"Where'd you learn that stuff?"

"Who, me?"

"You're not some ordinary bum."

"Honey," Vince's smile was cracked and painful in the darkness, "I'll bet you're pretty cute yourself."

The man's voice came low and ominous.

"Keep glued."

Keep glued. Keep riveted. Probing, parrying, racing through his own mind for clues, Vince was suffering. He was certain he had a fever. His diaphragm ached — God knows if he'd last out this trip. Sleep, yes; but now he needed the truth even more. *Take the man by the throat*, he told himself; *tell me, you scum, tell me!*

"Where you headed, Mac?" Vince tried to keep it low and laconic.

"What's it to you?"

"Don't get me wrong. I'm a writer, just naturally interested in people —"

"Shut up!"

"I paid the same fare for this ride as you, Mac. Guess I got a right —"

"Funny guy."

"Aw, be a pal. Guy wants to chew the fat a little — nobody's pulling the zipper on your private life, Mac. You're acting as if —"

Vince deliberately waited. He was listening, straining. The racket in the boxcar seemed overwhelming — no, there it was, the man's breathing, a rhythmic wheeze.

"Bet you're used to traveling Pullman," Vince said. "Like me. I've been in the dough —"

"I wasn't asking."

"Writer — top slicks, seventeen months in Hollywood. Ever been to the Paramount lot?"

Vince was fabricating wildly. He'd been in Hollywood, sure, like a thousand other jockeys. Placed with *Kingsblood* in the Hollywood 'Cap seven-eight years ago. But the rest, the movie malarkey, that was secondhand slopshop out of the mouth of a cameraman he once knew.

He heard the man's voice.

"You kidding?"

He had the man talking.

"Kidding? You never heard of the Paramount lot?"

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"Yeah, yeah. That big movie outfit, full of crumbs and chromium-plated jerks."

"Geniuses, you mean. Any man can pull down two-three G's a week, he's a genius. You don't want to argue with me on that, do you, Mac?"

"You talk too much."

"That's me, Lippy Looie, best damn script man ever got busted out of the land of milk and money. But it was fun while it lasted. Yes, sir, real fun."

"You're killing me."

"Weekends on Catalina — down One-Oh-One highway to Santa Anita, Delmar, Tijuana. Ed Berkowitz and me, he's still a biggie out there, we used to gun up the old Bearcat, get a gang of the boys, and beat it over the border for the Sunday bullfights. Pick up some babes on the way —"

But the man was coughing suddenly, heavily.

Vince waited. This was his game, and he was making an ally out of his enemy, the darkness. Somehow the night that filled the boxcar gave him a desperate kind of courage.

He'd lost momentum. He had to pick it up again.

"I'm dying for a cig," he said.

"I told you. Empty pack."

"That cough of yours, Mac —"

"Will you shut up!"

"Lungs like yours, Arizona's where you should be headed."

"Listen, buddy, another yap out of you and you're going to wind up in the snow!"

Snow.

Vince wasn't sure. He wasn't sure of anything but the image in his mind of a fellow named Mac prowling nervously in a stale-odored suite in Florida. Mac flushed and sport-shirted — a black-haired bantam, cocky and glib. Vince had met him at the start of the Hialeah season. He and Helen had been together, in fact, at the shindig where they met Mac and a couple of his fast pals — track scum, but high-class track scum. It was Mac who offered Vince his first stick of marihuana. It took. Vince had needed some outlet, the way things were going, all bang-bang and miserable, between him and Helen. Then there was the day, not long before the spill, when he'd gone up to Mac's suite and found Mac with some white powder in his palm.

Mac, grinning, had said it then — the same word.

Now it struck Vince with a rush. If this were the same man, then Mac was broke, a down-and-outer like himself, and probably consumptive in the bargain. And if to Mac, then a lot must have happened to Helen too.

Helen.

His stomach churned with hunger and hate. He had to know.

Shaking off a wave of sickness, Vince said, "Look, Mac. It's a long ride and I've got to pop off to somebody. You listening?"

There was no sound from the man. Vince was sweating under his leather jacket. What if he'd lost him? Vince pitched in.

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"Let me tell you how I — You got nothing else to do, have you? In Hollywood, see, I got assigned to this picture. A real little lulu picked out of some old slob's brains for a couple of G's. It was a story about a kid jockey — oh, not a kid, he'd been riding around for years, doing all right, but he'd never hit it big. Well, the story goes, he's met this babe, see? — meaning we had a low-budget blonde, see? Anyway, this jock and this blonde, they're living it up and our hero starts to get inspired around the track — wins a race, two races, three —"

"You don't have to tell me."

"I know it's corn, but listen —"

The man was hooked — Vince was sure of it. Oddly exhilarated, he felt the momentum gathering, felt himself swept along.

The man was saying, "Corn? I walked out on stuff like that when I was ten —"

"See what I mean? How'd you like to have to *write* it? Well, we got this boy and his blonde in an awful jam — married, of course, by now; but the blonde suddenly goes for a dapper little jerk with padded shoulders and a trimmed mustache, and the boy, a real square, knows from nothing. He even figures the guy for a pal, an okay guy — a little too smart but okay, see? And first thing you know —"

"Where the hell did you cook up this story?"

Vince was rounding a turn, moving fast.

"First thing you know, the boy's gone rotten with this little jerk and his fast crowd. Then, just on the eve of the big race at Hialeah, he switches from reefers to snow —"

Vince paused. He tried to moisten his lips. The effort brought pain to his throat and he felt the raised collar of his jacket with trembling fingers, pressing it inward. But he had to go on — he was almost home.

"The big race, see? The boy's nerves are shot. At the last minute he's learned that this jerk who put him on the habit wasn't on the level, see? The guy wasn't only two-timing with his wife, he was working for a syndicate that had lumps of it on the race — with our boy to lose! One helluva deal, either way! Trumpets — the boy in the paddock puts the snow to his nose — he's high when he's mounted at the barrier. They're off! He's fourth, third — halfway he's readying to make his move —"

The other man was clearing his throat. "What was the — what was the horse's name?"

"Wait — listen. Rounding the turn at the three-quarter mark, the boy lays on the whip. Then he sees it — on the rail. A sparrow — a little jerk of a gray sparrow! Only he's not sure if he sees it or he's just imagining it — the boy, I mean. Sparrow zoops-right across the horse's nose. Wham! A spill like they never saw at Hialeah. Three horses down — one they had to shoot — the boy unconscious under the pile — all because of one tiny little sparrow —"

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Now, thought Vince, *now or never.*

"Helen," the man said, "Helen's dead."

Now he knew this was his man, and he knew that Mac knew.

Vince leaped to his feet.

He cursed and lunged toward Mac, toward the spot —

The little man wasn't there.

Vince found himself on his knees, bruised, his head reeling. He bawled out, not recognizing his own voice in his rage and despair.

"Mac!" he shouted. "Mac, you —"

Then he was on his feet again, legs apart, struggling for balance, the blade of his knife opened, gripped in his right hand.

"Mac! Mac, I'm going to kill you, you —"

Through the clank and roar he heard the other men scurrying like frightened rats. The darkness had become a nightmare of scuffling, curses, shouts.

Then he heard the sliding noise. Somebody wanted daylight —

The side-door suddenly stood open, full width. An abyss of white mountainside raced by, and a draft of blizzard howled into the boxcar.

Mac was in shadow, standing and ready to spring.

Vince had to see more clearly. He squeezed his eyes shut, and in that instant Mac was on him.

Vince felt the blade pierce his leather jacket and the flesh of his fore-arm.

Then, wrist against wrist, they locked, writhed, parted suddenly, and maneuvered in a lurching circle. It was a switchblade ring-around-a-rosie. Shouts flew at them, but neither heeded, neither retreated. Then suddenly Vince lunged and slipped, and his opponent was upon him swiftly with plunging blade and pumping arm. But leather caught the knife and Vince slipped under, toppling the man, mounting him, gripping him between scissored thighs, striking home . . .

He dragged the bleeding figure to the boxcar door. The world was a white world speeding past. With his last strength he sobbed and thrust. The body rolled, took air.

Vince lay down where he had been standing and pressed his shivering body against the jolting floorboards.

Sleep was a mercy.

Only dimly did he remember later the freight's halting at some mountainside waterstop, and the men abandoning him in the car.

He was discovered by a brakeman and a detective when the freight was broken up in a railroad yard outside of Kansas City. They found no identification on him, and three days later he died in a coma in a big city hospital, untagged and unmourned. They wrapped his clothes unwittingly in the Sunday Sports Section of the Kansas City *Star*, which told the news from Louisville the day before. A policeman took the package to his precinct house, where it didn't make sense to keep what nobody would ever claim, but the law was the law.

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Cattle rustling in New England and murder at a livestock auction . . . unusual, interesting, informative, and consistent with Hugh Pentecost's private specialization in the field of the detective novelette — the use of out-of-the-ordinary backgrounds. It is remarkable how authentically Hugh Pentecost projects the multi-backgrounds of his highly professional, highly competent novelettes — another proof of the Pentecost versatility which keeps growing with the years . . .

THE TALKING CALF

by HUGH PENTECOST

IN HIS DREAM IT SEEMED TO GERARD that he heard Charlie crying out to him for help. The man with the hook had come for Charlie and was dragging him away. Gerard struggled with all his might to wake, and finally managed it, forcing himself up on his legs, and rubbing his eyes. Charlie, who had been sleeping with his head in Gerard's lap, was gone!

There were more than 500 calves in the pen at the cattle auction and all were milling restlessly about. Awake, Gerard could still hear Charlie's plaintive bleating. Gerard tried to wedge his way between the calves to the far side of the pen, but his ten-year-old strength was not enough. He finally fought his way to the railing and climbed up over the fence into the alleyway. At the end of the alley the wild-eyed cow was bellowing and kicking frantically at her stall gate. Charlie was somewhere in that direction.

It was almost dark, except for the low-watt electric bulbs around the walls of the building. Gerard realized he must have been asleep for two or three hours. Then Gerard heard the scream close by, high, harsh, the very essence of terror.

Gerard froze for a moment. Then he started, fearfully, along the alley toward the sound of Charlie's wailing. Once more the scream rose, and was suddenly stilled. The wild-eyed cow redoubled her violent efforts to kick her way to freedom.

Gerard moved toward the corner of the calf pen and hesitated, half afraid to turn it. Suddenly he was caught from behind. An arm went round him, pinioning his own arms, and a calloused hand was clapped over his mouth. A hoarse whisper sounded in his ears:

"What did you see, kid? *What did you see?*"

Gerard hadn't seen anything until that moment, but now, unable to move his head, his bulging eyes were

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staring through the open slats into the stall of the wild-eyed cow. The animal was rearing up and pounding down with her front hoofs on a heap of what looked like rags lying in the shavings of her stall. The rags flopped to one side, and Gerard cried out behind the muffling hand. It wasn't rags at all. It was an old man, in what had once been a neat blue suit, now torn and filthy. The silver hair was smeared with blood. Gerard closed his eyes as the murderous hoofs started straight down at the old man's white face. Then, mercifully, something struck Gerard on the back of the head and he heard and saw nothing more.

The next thing Gerard knew he was being shaken, violently. He opened his eyes. The man with a steel hook for a hand was bending over him.

"Okay, kid. Okay. That's better," the man said. "Now — what happened here? Did you see who did it? Come on, kid. Talk!"

The fog cleared from Gerard's head. He didn't look in the stall again where the old man lay. He didn't speak. He couldn't. He knew it would be useless. Who would believe him if he said he knew, because Charlie had told him, who had been there? People would laugh, because Charlie was, after all, just a 140-pound veal calf.

It had all begun with Charlie. They had bound his legs and stuffed them in a burlap bag to keep him from moving. Gerard had preferred this to tying Charlie in the back of the truck, because of the danger he might hang himself on the way to Sanders' place. Gerard rode in the back with Charlie, holding his head and stroking him when he looked up at Gerard with his soft brown eyes and moaned. Gerard couldn't speak to him because the tears were hot behind his eyes and his throat muscles were tight from fighting back the sobs.

Once, when Charlie made a violent effort to free himself from the bonds, Gerard did find his voice.

"I'm going to try my very best to save you, Charlie," he said. "I promise you. I promise." And then the tears spilled down his face and tasted salty in his mouth.

Joe Lucas, the part-time hired man, sang as he drove the pick-up, and Gerard could hear him through the broken back window of the cab. Gerard had grown up with Joe's strange off-key whistling and singing. Joe had been helping Gerard's mother a couple of hours a day on the New England farm since Gerard's father had died, which was so long ago Gerard did not really remember him at all. Joe had been the only man in the setup until today. Today, at the age of ten, Gerard had, painfully, become a man, too.

The process had begun a few nights ago when, for some reason, Gerard hadn't been able to sleep. Lying in his upstairs bunk he'd heard his mother and Joe talking downstairs. His mother had been telling Joe that there was no money. She couldn't pay him. Worse than that, she said she didn't know how she was going to

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feed herself and Gerard until the stuff in the truck garden was ready for market.

"There's the calf," Joe had said.

"No," Mrs. Richards said. "The calf is Gerard's. It's the only thing he's ever had that he really loves."

"Bring you seventy or eighty dollars at Sanders' Auction," Joe said.

"No," Mrs. Richards repeated. "We'll find some other way. The boy has little enough to give him pleasure."

Gerard had thought about it for two days. Then he approached Joe and told him he wanted to sell Charlie. He didn't want his mother to know till it was done, but he wanted to take Charlie to the auction and bring the money back to his mother.

Joe approved. "You're growing up, kid," he said. "Charlie'll bring a good price from the meat packers. He's a fine veal calf."

That was when Gerard's blood ran cold. He hadn't thought of anything but parting with Charlie; of Charlie's going to a bigger and better farm, where he'd really be happy.

"Couldn't we sell him as a dairy calf?" he asked Joe shakily.

"A bull calf with no papers is no use to a dairy farmer," Joe said. "You'll get ten or eleven dollars if you sell him dairy. A fat veal calf might bring eighty — even ninety dollars. Your ma needs the money, kid."

"If we could get as much for him dairy it would be all right, wouldn't it, Joe?"

"You ask Lon Sanders when we get to the auction," Joe said. "You'll see."

For a few moments Gerard was tempted to give up the whole idea. He couldn't do that to Charlie. He'd seen Charlie born at the big Greer farm next door, and Paul Greer had said they had no use for a bull calf and had given him to Gerard. Paul Greer was everything Gerard hoped to be when he grew up. Could you sell a gift from your very best friend? He tried to argue with himself that you couldn't, but he knew, somehow, that Paul would approve of what he was doing.

So the day came, and Mrs. Richards went to the store, and Gerard and Joe and Charlie set out for Sanders' Livestock Auction. Gerard had never been to an auction and he'd always wanted to go, but the tragedy of Charlie took all the pleasure out of it.

"It's just around the bend up there," Joe called back through the broken window.

The truck slowed down, and Gerard found that they were in a long line of trucks, loaded with cows, horses, calves, crates of poultry, eggs, and produce. They slowed down to a snail's pace, moving ahead a few yards, stopping, moving ahead again. Finally they turned off the main highway and along a dirt drive, between two big barns. Beyond the barns Sanders' Livestock Auction came into full view. There was a cluster of long, low, green-and-white buildings that covered more ground, Gerard guessed, than his mother's whole farm. In the yards were trucks—trucks and people.

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There were more people than Gerard had ever seen except at the county fair. Men in blue jeans, men in bright-colored shirts, men in slick city clothes. Quite a number of them carried natural wood canes. There were women, too, worn-looking women, who looked as though work had been their only lot in life. They milled slowly around, talking to acquaintances, looking at the stock and produce as it came in on the trucks. There was a peddler's truck, the back end open, revealing shirts, jackets, gloves, shoes, rubber boots, fancy blankets, and robes. No one seemed interested in buying from the peddler at the moment, and he sat on a campstool by the tailboard, a gaunt, unshaven man who looked as though he carried the world on his shoulders.

The pick-up suddenly moved forward. Someone shouted at Joe, "Calves in the third dock, Joe!"

Joe whirled the truck to the right, stopped it, and backed in toward the low green-and-white buildings. Men unfastened the tailboard of the truck and two of them came aboard.

"Hi, sonny," one of them said. He was a big, iron-gray man in blue coveralls. He reached down and, with a steel hook, slashed open the burlap bag that covered Charlie's legs. When he straightened up Gerard saw, with horror, that the hook was something the man had in place of a hand. A jackknife blade flashed, and the ropes were cut from Charlie's legs. Charlie staggered uncertainly onto his feet, and leaned against Gerard.

A man stood beside the truck with a sheaf of papers in his hand. "Name of owner?" he asked in a flat, nasal voice.

"Mrs. Sarah Richards, Wakeville," Joe said. He'd come around from the front of the cab.

"Veal or dairy?" the man asked.

"Veal," Joe said.

"Just a minute, please!" Gerard didn't recognize his own voice.

"Number 582," the man said.

The man with the hook had a long iron tool in his real hand. He leaned forward and the tool touched Charlie's left ear. There was a snapping sound, and Charlie bleated. A metal tag — Number 582 — had been fastened to the ear with a metal staple.

The man with the hook raised his knee and kicked Charlie in the stomach. "Get going," he said. "Yipee!"

Charlie staggered down off the truck onto the dock. Another man with a cane whacked him over the rump with it.

"Veal!" shouted the man with the hook.

Whack went the cane on Charlie's rump, and Charlie moved off down a narrow alleyway.

"Just a minute, please!" Gerard wailed.

The man with the hook turned to him with a tobacco-stained smile. "What is it, sonny?"

"I — I was supposed to talk to Mr. Sanders before we decided whether Charlie was dairy or veal," Gerard said.

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"Charlie?" the man asked.

"My calf, sir."

"Oh, he's veal, all right," the man said.

"Where could I find Mr. Sanders?" Gerard asked.

"He's around somewhere," the man with the hook said. "Okay, Joe. Get that jalopy out of there."

"But where is Mr. Sanders?" Gerard asked, his voice breaking.

"Better get out of here, sonny. You'll get hurt," the man with the hook said. "Skedaddle!"

Gerard looked around him, helplessly. Charlie had disappeared into the depths of the building. Joe was gone with the truck. Gerard was alone, and once more he couldn't check the tears.

To say that Lon Sanders was a big man was to make an understatement. He stood well over six feet and he was monstrously fat. Three smoothly shaven chins billowed down over the white collar of his shirt. His waistcoat covered a mountain of stomach, and the gold watch chain that spread across it looked heavy enough for a logging operation. His eyes, a strange pale blue, were sunk in deep sockets. He always wore a neat city suit, covered by a filthy raincoat, and his feet were encased, summer and winter, in manure-splattered rubber galoshes.

He stood by one of the hog pens in the green-and-white building, looking down at a black sow. A thin, rheumy-eyed farmer leaned on the top rail of the pen beside him.

"How heavy do you think she'll go, Lon?" the farmer asked.

Lon Sanders tugged at a lower lip as flexible as a rubber doll's. "Oh, I don't know, George. Three seventy-five, I'd say."

The farmer's face fell. "I'd 've thought she'd come closer to four hundred."

"Maybe. Maybe so, George. I hope so for your sake. I hope she'll come closer to four-fifty. But I'd say, three seventy-five. A nice hog. A real nice hog. Hope she brings you plenty."

Sanders moved his huge bulk along between the pens toward the sales ring. He carried a cane, like so many of the others, a cane with a pointed metal ferrule on the end of it, and he poked at imaginary objects with it as he walked.

Just before he reached the sales ring an elderly man in a neat blue serge suit came toward him from the other direction. "See you a minute alone, Lon?" he asked.

"Why, sure, Mr. Greer."

Dave Greer lowered his voice. "They got fourteen head of Black Angus off the Watson farm in Brookdale last night," he said.

Sanders' eyes had the hooded look of a gambler's who's used to working under bright lights. "Fourteen!" he said.

"Backed a truck right up to the lower meadow and carted them off," Greer said.

"It gets me how nobody ever sees or recognizes these trucks," Sanders said. "They must be from out of

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state. Nobody'd dare use local trucks."

"No," Greer said. There was something about his tone that made Lon Sanders shift his pale eyes.

"How do you mean, Dave?"

"I was agreeing with you," Greer said. "That's over four hundred head of cattle have been stolen in this area in the last two months. Lord knows how many hundred more in other parts of New England."

"Probably a thousand head in all," Sanders said.

"I've given up on the State Police," Greer said. "I'm going to use my own methods for catching up with these people!"

Sanders' pale blue eyes moved again. "What kind of methods?"

Dave Greer shook his head and indicated something behind Lon. The huge bulk of the auctioneer turned and he looked down at a small, red-eyed boy.

"Want to get by, son?" Lon asked. "I do kind of fill up this here alleyway."

"Why, it's Sarah Richards' boy, isn't it?" Dave Greer asked.

"Yes, sir," Gerard said. "Could you tell me where I could find Mr. Sanders, Mr. Greer?"

"This is Mr. Sanders, Gerard."

"Oh."

"Something I can do for you, Mr. Richards?" Lon asked gravely.

"It's about my calf, sir," Gerard said. "Charlie." He looked at Greer. "The one Paul gave me, sir."

"Oh, yes," Greer said. "He would be about ready now. A nice bull calf."

"It's a question of whether we can get more for him as a dairy calf or a veal calf, sir," Gerard said, looking anxiously up at Lon.

"A bull calf, you say?" Lon's voice was deep and judicial.

"Yes, sir."

"He'll bring twice as much and more as a veal calf, Mr. Richards." Gerard's face quivered. The pale blue eyes stared down at him thoughtfully. "This your first sale, Mr. Richards?"

"Yes, sir."

"I know how you feel," Lon said. "Remember the first time I sold a veal calf. Remember it very well. But after you've run your own farm a while, Mr. Richards, well — you'll find it's all in the day's work. If you want a good price — definitely veal."

Gerard's lips trembled. "Th-thank you, sir," he said.

The inside sales ring of Sanders' Livestock Auction looked a little bit like a small sporting club. The ring itself was a half-circle. Across the diameter was the raised auctioneer's counter, flanked on one side by the exit chute and on the other by the entrance into a fenced pen which was actually the large scales upon which the entering animal is weighed for all to see before it is brought into the ring. Rising around the perimeter of the circle were the spectators' seats, banked in bleacher rows rising two stories high inside the building. To the right of the seats was the office, presided over by the cashier and his clerks and

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bookkeepers. It was here that the buyers made their payments and received their consignment slips which permitted them to pick up their purchases.

Mac Sperry, a dried-up little man, had been Lon Sanders' cashier for years. He sat behind the window, sucking on a dry straw, and nodding without warmth to the hundreds of people who came his way. There was nothing about Mac to notice until he started counting money. Then his agile fingers would flick off a stack of greasy bills with the speed of an expert card mechanic. Mac could tell you today's market price, yesterday's market price, and the price on any given day over the past fifteen years.

Gerard, feeling entirely helpless, had turned away from Lon and old Dave Greer, not knowing what to do or where to go. He had seen Mac sitting behind the window, and there was nothing of warmth or sympathy there to help him. He was about to turn away when he saw Paul Greer.

Paul was tall and gracefully thin. His movements were quick but controlled, like a good athlete's. He was good-looking, in a regular-featured way, and his tousled blond hair made him look younger than his twenty-five years. He seemed to be lost in thoughts of his own, because he didn't even see Gerard until the boy spoke. Then he stopped.

"Oh, hello, Gerard. Come to see the fun?"

Gerard tried to steady his voice: "It's about Charlie, Paul."

"Charlie?"

"My — my calf."

"Oh. Selling him?" Paul asked.

"We — we have to."

"Ought to bring a good price by now," Paul said. He patted Gerard's shoulder. "Be seeing you," he said. He walked away, leaving Gerard with a feeling of complete desertion. Paul went into the office.

"Hi," Mac Sperry said.

"Hi," Paul said. It was an automatic response. He was looking past Mac at a girl who sat behind a desk at the rear of the office.

"You hear Hal Watson lost fourteen head of Black Angus last night?" Mac asked.

"I heard." Paul was still looking at the girl, who seemed suddenly busy with the papers on her desk.

"Cops don't seem to be getting anywhere with this racket," Mac said. "Most likely in on it themselves," he added cynically.

"Most likely," Paul said, almost as if he hadn't heard. He walked past Mac toward the rear of the office.

Esther Mulloy saw him coming. She was an uncommonly pretty girl, without affectations. Her job was to enter the figures from the auctioneer's clerk's sheets onto the company books. Her job didn't begin until the sales actually started in the ring.

Paul stopped by her desk and stood looking down at her. "I'm sorry about last night," he said.

"It's all right, Paul."

"I meant to call you, but I didn't have a chance."

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"It's all right."

"Esther —"

"Yes, Paul?"

"I — I wish I could explain."

"When you're ready," she said steadily.

A door slammed behind them, so loudly that Paul turned. A dark-haired young man wearing blue jeans, a dark blue shirt, leather jacket, and a battered felt hat had come into the office. He walked straight back toward Paul and Esther, his eyes blazing. He ignored Paul.

"Where were you last night, Esther?" he demanded.

The girl's lips tightened into a straight line. "I'm afraid that isn't any concern of yours, Hal," she said.

Hal Watson dropped his cigarette on the floor and crushed it out under his heel. "I'm past being jealous," he said. "This is more important than that."

"It's still none of your business," Esther said.

Hal Watson turned on Paul, whose face had gone chalky white. "Are you claiming you were with her?" he demanded.

Paul's fists were clenched at his side. "I'm not claiming anything," he said in a low voice.

Watson turned back to Esther. "Were you with him?"

"It's still none of your business, Hal," she said.

Watson leaned forward, as though Paul wasn't there. "Stay clear of this, Esther."

"Stay clear of what?"

"It doesn't matter how I feel. I guess you know. I'm not a good loser. I hate his hide. But I wouldn't be out to get him, just on that account."

"Wouldn't you, Hal?"

"Okay — you think I'm that kind of a heel. But I don't want you hurt." Watson faced Paul. "I've had my eye on you, Paul, for a long time. Your old man has a lot of influence in this neck of the woods. The police wouldn't dream of looking in your direction. But I would!"

Paul just stood there, motionless, pale, silent.

Watson turned back to Esther: "I want you out from under, Esther, when the roof falls in. They took me last night. Fourteen head! Well, I've had my eye on Paul for a long time, and now I'm going to get him!" He faced Paul again, waiting for an answer. When he didn't get one he turned and walked out of the office.

"Paul!" Esther said. "You didn't even answer him. He was accusing you!"

Paul looked at her, misery in his blue eyes. Then he, too, turned and walked away without a word.

Number 582 was a long way from the top of the list, and Gerard, his throat still aching from the constriction of the muscles, knew what he must do. He must spend whatever time there was left with Charlie. He began a kind of half frightened search, through the labyrinth of alleyways between stalls and pens, to locate the place where the veal calves waited

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their turn to go on the block. He found it, after wandering through the horse sheds, the pens for beef cattle, the hog pens, because of Charlie's plaintive wailing. Gerard knew that sound as well as he knew his own mother's voice. Several hundred other calves were bawling, but Charlie's special bleat of greeting was distinctive — at least, to Gerard.

The veal-calf pen was at the very farthest end of the string of buildings and sheds. Just opposite it was a series of box stalls, or single pens. The very last one in the row contained a wild-eyed cow, which was trying with a kind of methodical fury to kick down the rails of the pen. Gerard walked warily past this stall to where Charlie, as if by a sure knowledge of the need for self-preservation, had got just as far to the rear of the pen as he could. Gerard reached his hands through to Charlie, and Charlie licked them with his tongue, rough as sandpaper. Gerard felt as though his heart would burst. It was as though Charlie knew what was coming and was pleading with him.

Gerard climbed over the fencing and into the pen. He had often sat with Charlie in his stall at home. Now they were surrounded by hundreds of other churning, frightened animals. Gerard wedged his back against the corner made by the wall and the fencing. Then he slid down into a sitting position on the soft shavings.

Charlie nuzzled him, and then knelt down on his uncertain front legs. Finally he plopped all the way down and let Gerard stroke his hard forehead.

Somewhere in the distance Gerard heard a sound, vaguely familiar. It was like that of the tobacco auctioneers on the radio. Lon Sanders had begun his grueling day's work of selling hundreds of items, one by one. It had a strange lulling, soothing sound, even though it spelled the approach of tragedy. The truth was, Gerard had not slept the night before from worrying about Charlie. Now Charlie lay quite still and Gerard put his head down on Charlie's shoulder, and presently he slept.

That was when he dreamed the dream about the man with the hook taking Charlie away. That was when he woke, and climbed the fence, and was seized from behind, and saw old Mr. Greer being trampled by the wild-eyed cow. . . .

The air in the sales ring was fetid with the smells of stale tobacco, sweating animals, wet wool from the clothes of those who had come in out of a late afternoon rain, and disinfectant required by law in the surrounding pens. Three hours had gone by since Lon Sanders, along with his clerk, had taken their places behind the auctioneer's counter. The deep, rumbling voice had gone on continuously for that time — except for one or two brief breaks when Lon was called outside — disposing of poultry, eggs, farm machinery, harnesses, blankets, and wagons. It had continued on with the sale of beef cattle, and went on

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now toward the end of the sale of horses. Beef cattle, horses, and veal calves went before the animals consigned for dairy sale because the buyers were different. Packing houses bought the first three items.

It was toward the very last of the horses that the ring man led in a heavy-legged work horse with great white globes for eyes. The animal was clearly blind.

"This one doesn't look so good," Lon Sanders said dryly. "In fact, he doesn't look good at all."

There was a murmur of appreciation for the witticism from the crowd in the seats.

"Who'll start this horse?" Lon droned. "There's still work in him. Work single or double. Got to be sound in wind and limb. Who'll start this horse? Do I hear forty? Do I hear forty?" He looked around. "He's got to go, boys. Let's see his mouth, Ed!"

The ring man pushed back the horse's heavy lips, revealing his teeth.

"He's got a fairly decent tooth, boys. A real decent tooth. Who'll start him? Do I hear forty? Do I hear forty?"

"Twenty dollars!"

Lon looked wounded. "Twenty dollars!" The sound of doom crept into his voice. "There's good news tonight! The price of hamburger's coming down." Then the monotonous babble started. "So I have twenty dollars — who'll give me twenty-one? I have twenty, who'll give me twenty-one? Twenty-twenty-one? Twenty-twenty-one? He's poor but honest, boys. Do I hear twenty-one? I have twenty, want twenty-one. Twenty, want twenty-one."

The man with the hook walked in through the exit chute and went over to the counter. He stretched upward to whisper something to Lon, who stopped his cry for the moment. The ring man led the blind horse slowly around the ring. Suddenly Lon straightened up and brought his gavel down hard on the counter.

"Sold — to Ned Brown for twenty dollars!" He raised his huge bulk. "Ed, take over for me when you get rid of that piece of prime sirloin! Sorry, folks, but when you gotta go, you gotta go," Sanders said.

He climbed down from behind the counter and followed the man with the hook out through the chute, slapping at the side of his leg with the natural wood cane.

As soon as they were out of sight of the crowd Hook Jaeger turned to the auctioneer: "It's pretty bad, boss. He's ground to a pulp."

"What was he doing in the pen with that animal? Dave Greer wasn't here to buy."

"Got me, boss."

From down the alley came the frightened bellowing of a steer.

"How'd you happen to find him?" Lon asked.

"That cow Millbanks brought in. We had trouble unloading her and we stuck her off by herself. She's been raisin' Cain ever since she got here, gettin' the calves riled up. I went back to see if I couldn't quiet her

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down, and found him in with her."

"You left him in there?" Lon asked.

Jaeger stopped and faced the auctioneer. He scratched his cheek with the steel hook. "The cow didn't kill him, boss." He pointed to the iron-ferruled cane in Sanders' hand. "One of them, jammed several inches in between his shoulder blades, and broke off."

Lon's face didn't change expression by a hair. "Maybe he fell on it."

"Maybe," Hook said.

Lon pushed past him. "Nobody else around?"

"Only a kid," Hook said. "The Richards boy. Came in with a calf and was hangin' around the calf pen. He heard the old man scream, he says. But he didn't see anything."

"We'll have to keep this quiet till the cops get here or we'll have a riot."

Lon moved with remarkable speed for his bulk down the last hundred feet of alley to the cow pen. He saw Gerard cowering against the far wall at the end of the alley, but he didn't stop. In the pen the cow had backed away from the remains of Dave Greer, her head lowered, snorting and pawing at the shavings. Lon reached for the catch on the pen door.

"Don't go in there with her alone, boss," Hook warned.

Lon didn't answer. He swung the pen door wide and stepped in. The frenzied cow bellowed loud and reared up on her hind legs.

Lon raised his massive right arm and struck the animal a slashing blow over the nose with the crooked end of his cane. It seemed to take every ounce of fight out of the animal.

"Run her into the pen with the other beef animals," Lon said. He walked around and slapped the cow on the rump with his bare hand. Meekly, the cow ambled out into the alley. Lon knelt down beside Dave Greer's crumpled body. If there was a piece of cane stuck in the man's back he couldn't see it, because old Mr. Greer lay on his back, staring with one sightless eye at the white-washed ceiling. The other eye had been obliterated by the pounding hoofs. Lon knelt there without touching the body.

"So you had methods of your own, Dave," he muttered. "Too bad you didn't get to tell me about 'em." He lurched upward onto his feet and walked out into the alley.

Hook came back after having disposed of the cow. "Doctor?" he asked.

"Are you kidding?" Lon said. "Get Mac to call the trooper barracks and tell 'em there's been an accident. And keep your mouth shut, Hook. The sale has to go on, you know. We don't want all the buyers out here gawkin'."

"You're the boss," Hook said, and started away.

"And, Hook! Paul Greer is around somewhere. I saw him earlier. Send him in here."

Lon fumbled in the pocket of his old raincoat and produced a package of gum. He unwrapped a stick, carefully, and put it in his mouth. Then

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he turned, like an engine in a roundhouse, and faced Gerard, who all this time had remained silent, flattened against the far wall at the end of the alley.

"Mind if I have a word with you, Mr. Richards?"

It was as though being spoken to released Gerard from some kind of spell. He came forward and stood in front of Lon, his eyes lowered.

"You must have had a pretty bad time, Mr. Richards," Lon said.

The small hands were knotted into fists, and the thin shoulders shook.

"I understand you were back here keepin' that animal of yours company," Lon said. Gerard nodded.

"You hear or see anything?"

"I — I heard him scream — twice," Gerard whispered.

"But you didn't see nothin'?" the big man persisted.

Gerard looked up at the pale blue eyes. "I didn't *see* anything, sir," he said. "Not till the man with the hook came and f-found Mr. Greer."

"That's all you saw, Mr. Richards?"

"I s-saw the cow — t-trampling him, sir."

Lon's jaws moved on the stick of gum as he looked thoughtfully at the boy. There was no chance to talk further because excited voices sounded at the far end of the alley. Lon turned, and saw Paul Greer running toward them, followed by Joe Lucas and Hook.

Everyone knew about Paul Greer. He wasn't really a Greer at all. Old Dave and his wife had never had any children. It was one of those tragedies that seem most often to happen to people who really want kids. Paul had been adopted when he was a small boy, and he'd been the apple of old Dave Greer's eye. So much so, people said, that old Dave didn't notice that Paul wasn't much like a Greer.

Paul had had every chance: gone to school and to agricultural college. Some day the big Greer farm would be his. But Paul was wild, people said; liked the girls. He'd be out till all hours, which is no way for a farmer. Old Dave didn't know what went on with Paul, they said, especially of late. Dave didn't know, they said, that Paul was drinking a lot and that his company wasn't of the best. He was even giving Esther Mulloy a hard time; a fellow should see more of the girl he's going to marry, and not stand her up on dates or take her to places a fellow wouldn't take a nice, decent girl. It was too bad, they said, that she couldn't see the good in Hal Watson, a fellow more her kind.

Paul brushed past Lon now and went into the pen without saying a word. Just inside the gate he stopped and stared down at his foster-father's body. Then, suddenly, he turned away, rested his arm on the top rail of the pen, and buried his face against it. The others watched him, silent, expectant. At last he lifted his head and faced them.

"Why have you left him there?" he asked. His voice was harsh and unsteady.

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"We've sent for the troopers, son," Lon said.

"Does he have to lie there in shavings and manure?" Paul demanded.

"The cow didn't kill him, son. Hook saw a piece of a cane rammed in his back and broke off. We figured he shouldn't be touched till the troopers got here."

"You can cover him, can't you?" Paul said.

Lon made a gesture to Hook, who went off in search of a blanket. No one spoke again. Joe Lucas stared down at the body, whistling, off-key, between his teeth. Joe never was much for talk. He was dark, loose-jointed, laconic. People said he'd been good to the widow Richards, giving her a lot of free time when he could have been making overtime on his truck-driving job for Lon.

Joe seemed, suddenly, to become aware of Gerard. He walked over to him, and knelt down in front of him.

"You saw it happen, kid?" he asked.

Gerard shook his head. "I heard it, but I didn't see anything, Joe."

"What did you hear, kid?"

"I heard him scream. I — I was back in there with Charlie."

"But you didn't see anyone around?"

"I didn't see anyone. I didn't see anyone at all, Joe."

Joe stood up. "Your mother'll have my hide for letting you in for this. Not that I could help it."

Hook came back down the alley with a red plaid carriage robe. He started into the pen with it, but Paul took it away from him and gently covered the body.

"I'll stay with him till the troopers come," he said to Lon.

"I guess we'll all stay, son," Lon said. "Hook, you kind of hang around the end of the runway and see we don't collect a crowd."

"You're the boss," Hook said again, and went away.

"I'd kind of like to get the kid out of here," Joe Lucas said. "It's no place for him."

Lon tugged at his lower lip. "I guess you could take him outside somewhere," he said. "Only, he's a kind of a witness, Joe. The troopers'll want to talk to him. So don't take him far."

"I'd rather stay here, sir."

Lon looked down and saw Gerard standing very close to him, a pleading look in his eyes. "It's not going to be pleasant, Mr. Richards."

"I'd rather stay here, sir."

"It's no place for you, kid," Joe said. "You come with me. Your mother'll have my hide if I let you stay here."

"Please, sir!" Gerard said to Lon.

Lon scowled down at him. "I tell you what, Mr. Richards. You go out for a stroll around with Joe, and then as soon as the troopers get here they'll be wanting you back. Probably ten minutes or so."

"Run along, Gerard," Paul Greer said.

Joe Lucas took Gerard's arm and led him away. Lon watched them go

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from under his heavy, hooded lids. Then he turned to Paul Greer. "Wanted to talk to you alone, son, while I had a chance," he said.

Paul's face twisted with a spasm of pain. "I was just talking to him. Not half an hour ago!"

"I was talkin' to him, too, earlier," Lon said. "We were talkin' about these truck rustlers. They got Hal Watson last night — fourteen head."

"Oh?" Paul said.

"Dave said he was tired of the way the troopers were handling things," Lon said. "He told me he was goin' to use his own methods. Got any idea what they were, Paul?"

"No," Paul said, looking down at the toes of his heavy boots.

"He must have talked to you, son."

"No."

Lon chewed his gum for a moment, his big fingers fiddling with the watch chain across his stomach. "I figured maybe he was gettin' on the trail of someone," he said slowly. "No use pretendin', Paul. He was murdered. You know any other reason why somebody'd be out to get him? He was liked around here, well liked."

"No."

"Look, son, I'm your friend. I was Dave's friend. No reason to clam up on me."

Paul looked straight at him. "If I had the answers, Lon, I'd give them to you. I don't know who killed him or why. I wish I did."

"Maybe we can give 'em to you," a voice said, from behind Lon.

The big man turned, and found Hal Watson and Mac Sperry, the cashier, standing there. Watson's eyes were dark with anger.

"He wishes he had the answers!" Watson said. "That's a laugh. Tell 'em, Mac. If I do, they'll say I'm gunning for him on account of Esther."

Mac Sperry chewed on the dry straw in the corner of his mouth.

"What are you doin' away from your window, Mac?" Lon asked.

"Esther's took over," Mac said. "I figured we ought to tell you what we heard. Hook phoned the troopers from the office; that's how I knew what'd happened."

"What's that got to do with Paul here?"

"'Bout an hour ago," Mac said, "I was helping load the poultry crates, like I always do. Met Hal out there, and we started back towards the office together. Talking about his cattle that was stolen last night. We was just by the Number Four dock when we heard a couple of guys arguin'." Mac took the straw out of his mouth and pointed it at Paul. "Him and old Dave."

"You couldn't help hearing them," Hal said.

Lon's pale blue eyes shifted to Paul, who stood there, staring down at his boots. "Were you arguin' with Dave, Paul?"

"What can he say?" Watson said. "We both heard them."

"Old Dave said he was through with him," Mac said. "Somethin' about he'd given him everything and this was how he got paid back."

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"How?" Lon asked.

"Didn't say," Mac said. "Paul give as good as he was gettin', and with interest. He told the old man to lay off or he'd let him have it, even if he was an old man."

"He wasn't that delicate," Watson said. "He told him he'd kill him if he didn't lay off!"

"That right, Mac?" Lon asked quietly.

"I guess it is," Mac said. "'Course he was mad. I don't say as he meant it. You know how it is when you're mad."

"Look in that pen and you'll see how it is!" Watson said. "There've been rumors about Paul for a long time — the kind of people he was hanging out with. He couldn't wait for the old man to die. He wanted money now. Ask him where he was last night when my cattle were stolen. Check back with him on the other thefts. I'll bet my life that's what he and the old man were talking about. Old Dave had caught up with this louse. He would have turned him in."

Lon turned to Paul: "Well, son?"

Paul Greer didn't face his accusers. "Would you expect me to admit he's telling the truth?" he asked. "And if I told you he's lying, would you believe me?"

Watson moved forward so that there was no way for Paul to avoid him. "You've been coming to these auctions ever since we were kids, Paul. You and I both. When you were ten years old the old man gave you a cane, like all the traders carry. For fifteen years you've carried that cane every Tuesday afternoon of your life. I saw you had it earlier today. Where is it now? You're not carrying your cane now!"

Paul looked down at his hands as though surprised to find the cane wasn't there.

"I'll tell you where it is!" Watson said. "It's broken off in the old man's heart! That's where it is."

Paul's punch started from way back, but it never reached its mark. Lon's left hand grabbed his arm before it could land. The strength of his grip must have been enormous to stay the momentum of the swing.

"Now we'll get to the bottom of this nice and peaceful, Paul," he said. "Nice and peaceful, if you don't mind."

Gerard's hand was a small ice cube reposing in Joe Lucas's firm grip, and Gerard's heart pounded against his ribs as they emerged from the end of the alley and stepped out onto the deserted loading docks. It was almost dark outside, and floodlights, fixed on the building and circling the yard, illuminated the hundreds of parked trucks. In the background the substitute auctioneer was rattling on, a high-pitched tenor in contrast to Lon's rich baritone. He had just started the first lot of veal calves.

Just across the yard Gerard saw that the peddler was doing a brisk business in bright-colored shirts and weatherproof jackets. The rain had stopped, but there were still puddles on the

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ground, reflecting the light from the floods.

"Let's take a walk around, kid," Joe said.

"No! Please, Joe!" Gerard said.

Joe looked at him. "What's the matter with you, kid? We'll take a look at things. It will take your mind off — that back there."

"I'd rather stay here, Joe."

"What ails you?" Joe sounded exasperated.

What ailed Gerard was pure, unadulterated, stomach-burning fear. Because Gerard knew who had killed old Dave Greer: the man who had grabbed him from behind, and whispered to him, "What did you see, kid? What did you see?" That same man had struck him, flat-handed, alongside the head and knocked him on his face in the shavings, so that Gerard had only heard the sound of his escaping footsteps and hadn't seen him. But Gerard knew who it was. Charlie had told him. Charlie had told him just as surely as if he had been able, like a person, to speak the man's name.

Charlie had that special bleat of greeting. For months Gerard had heard it every time he approached the shed where Charlie was kept back home. He always had it for Gerard and for his mother, and for the one other person who ever cared for him — Joe Lucas. When Gerard had waked from his sleep in the calf pen, Charlie had been gone, but Gerard had heard him saying hello to someone. Charlie would never have left Gerard except to greet a friend, and the only other friend he had in this terrible place was Joe Lucas!

"Let's walk around," Joe said, tugging at Gerard's hand.

Gerard knew what would happen. Joe would take him out behind the trucks, out into some dark recess of the yard, and there make sure that he never told anyone what only he and Charlie knew. Joe had never been so thoughtful of him before. Usually he was telling Gerard not to bother him and to get out of his way and not to ask so many questions. Now he was being kind and thoughtful; and Gerard knew that it was a fraud.

"Couldn't we go in and watch the auction, Joe?" Gerard asked.

"They're starting the veal calves;" Joe said. "You don't want to watch that, do you? You don't want to see them sell Charlie, do you?"

They would sell Charlie, the only other witness, and then Joe would take care of him, Gerard told himself, and no one would ever know who'd killed old Dave Greer. Gerard's mind raced over a dozen impossible methods of escape and then lit on a simple one.

"I have to go to the bathroom," he told Joe.

The rest rooms were built in sheds at one end of the row of green-and-white buildings. Joe didn't seem to suspect. He took Gerard over to the sheds and told him he'd wait outside for him. Gerard went in with only one thought in mind. There had to be a back way out! He would get away and hide somewhere until Lon Sanders

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or the troopers found out it was Joe and arrested him.

Gerard couldn't tell them, he knew. They wouldn't believe him when he said that Charlie had told him. They'd let Joe go free until they found some other evidence, and Joe would surely take that chance to kill him. Gerard knew he could expect no help from anyone. They wouldn't believe him until it was too late.

Escape from the rest room turned out to be unexpectedly simple. There was an exit at the back into the main buildings. Gerard stepped through the door and found himself very near the sales ring. He saw the rows of people seated around the ring, saw Esther Mulloy's anxious face behind the glass of the cashier's window. He saw a calf come into the pen that was really the great scales, and saw the big, black needle registering his weight.

"I got three hundred of these veal calves to sell," the assistant auctioneer announced, "and I don't aim to take over an hour doin' it. So liven up out there, men!" Then he began the meaningless babble of the calling.

Gerard had no time to waste. He looked around, and saw that there was a narrow opening to one side of the rows of seats, just about wide enough for him to squeeze through. No one was paying any attention to him; they were watching the calf in the ring. Gerard wedged his way through the opening and found himself in a large space under the seats. It was littered with trash: cigarette butts, candy wrappers, pop bottles. In one corner was a stack of mildewed feed bags. Gerard headed for these, burrowed his way under them, and pulled a sour-smelling piece of burlap over his head.

The sounds of the auction went on around him.

Sergeant Finney, of the State Troopers, waited at the gate to the pen, tapping a cigarette on the back of his hand, as the doctor finished his examination of Dave Greer's body. Finally the doctor rose, dusting off his hands.

"Nothing more I can do here," he said. "Can't make a definite report without an autopsy, but I'll say this — if the cane was in him before he was trampled on, it killed him. But the trampling would have killed him, too. Broke darn' near every bone in his body."

"Why would anyone jab the cane in him afterwards?" Finney asked.

"That's your department," the doctor said. "Get the body down to the undertaking parlor and I'll let you know in a couple of hours for sure. Right now I'd say he was murdered by the cane being rammed clean through his heart. . . . Be seeing you, Sergeant." The Doctor nodded to Lon, chewing on his cud of gum, to Paul and Hal Watson and Mac Sperry, and went off, carrying his little black bag.

Finney turned to Lon. "How do you figure it, Lon?" he asked.

The auctioneer drew a long, wheezing breath. "Got to figure it by things you know, Finney. I knew Dave

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Greer. He wasn't no spring chicken any more, but he'd never of turned his back on any man who was lookin' for trouble. Whoever skewered him with that cane, sneaked up on him. Otherwise, Dave would have got it in front. That's the kind of man he was."

"So he was killed and dragged in here so it'd look like a trampling," Finney said.

"With that cane in his back?"

"It broke off. Maybe the murderer figured on pulling it out after he got in the pen. Maybe that crazy cow scared him off, or maybe he heard someone coming."

"Maybe," Lon said.

"You don't go along with it?" the trooper asked.

"I figure it happened right here," Lon said. "The boy heard him scream. Heard him scream twice. I figure that was when he got it from behind. Then the killer pushed him into the pen with the cow. The cane broke off in the wound and he didn't have any time to pull out the piece that was left in."

"What boy?"

"The Richards kid," Hal Watson said.

"He's around when you want to talk to him," Lon said. "Claims he didn't see anything. But he heard Dave scream. He was over there in the veal-calf pen with an animal he'd brought in."

"What would Greer be doing back here?" the trooper asked.

Lon shrugged. "It's a public place, Finney."

"I'll tell you what he was doing here," Watson said. "He and Paul were having their argument in the Number Four dock. That's right at the end of this alley. Dave walked away from Paul — just trying to get away from him. Paul followed him down here and let him have it."

"Got anything to say about that, Paul?" Finney asked.

Paul Greer just shook his head.

"One thing, Lon," Finney said. "Most of the canes these fellows carry have no tips on 'em, or rubber tips. I notice yours has an iron ferrule. It would have to be one like that you could use as a weapon. What's the idea of a sharp point?"

"I bought half a dozen of 'em, oh, fifteen years ago," Lon said. "They was made for mountain climbing. Caught my fancy. Turned out to be handy, wintertimes. Lot of snow and ice around pastures where you go to look at animals."

"And it was one of those canes Dave Greer gave Paul," Watson said.

"Your cane has one of those iron points?" Finney asked Paul.

"You've heard from the star witness for the prosecution," Paul said.

Lon nodded slowly. "No use arguin' that one, son," he said. "I gave one of them canes to Dave, and I remember he passed it on to you."

"Where is it?" Finney asked.

"I don't know," Paul said.

"He had it earlier this afternoon," Watson said.

"How about it, Paul?"

"I had it," Paul said. "But I don't

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know where it is now. I must have put it down somewhere."

Lon slapped his own cane against his leg. "Couldn't tell one of those canes from another," he said, "unless a fellow cut his initials into it."

"Is yours marked, Paul?" Finney asked.

"No," Paul said.

"Tryin' to remember where they all went," Lon said. "There's mine and Paul's. Gave one to a horse dealer over in Kent — fellow's out in North Dakota now. There's one hung around the office a while and somebody snitched it. Never saw it again."

"That was over eight years ago," Mac Sperry said.

"Recollect I gave the other two to dealers from out of state. One of 'em's dead; the other I haven't seen for years."

"So there were yours and Paul's," Finney said.

Lon smiled faintly. He held up his stick. "And which one would you say this is?"

"What're you trying to confuse things for, Lon?" Watson demanded.

"I just ain't a conclusion-jumper, Hal, that's all," Lon said. "Could you swear this isn't Paul's cane?"

"No-o," Watson said. "But you could. I bet it hasn't been out of your hand all day. Never saw you without it."

"Might not be a bad idea to go after facts instead of guesses," Lon said. "I think Dave was killed by someone he'd caught up with in this cattle-rustling business."

"And I say that was Paul," Watson said. "I can produce evidence to show that —"

"And I think," Lon interrupted smoothly, "that Richards kid knows something he isn't telling. Didn't act natural. Maybe he's thought it over now and will do a little talking."

"You think he saw something, Lon?" Mac Sperry asked.

"I think he was holding something back — I don't know what. You better get back on the job, Mac. With Paul here in trouble, I've got a hunch Esther's figures might be kind of haphazard."

Sergeant Finney was not a brilliant man, but he was an honest, thorough police officer. In the small towns he covered from the barracks he was more than an instrument of the law. If you were a man in his position you got to know people. You took the drunks home instead of arresting them. You listened to the hard-luck stories, almost like a priest. You used your judgment, except where infractions of the law were clear. Reckless driving was something you tried to cure before you punished it. You got to be a real part of the community. Finney was liked, and he had been respected 100 per cent until this cattle stealing had begun a few months back.

It had broken out like a rash. From the evidence of tire tracks and cut wires it was clear that trucks backed up to the pastures in the dead of night and took the cattle. There were never more taken than could be managed

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in one truckload, but the plague was persistent. Ten here tonight; a dozen fifty miles away tomorrow night; fifteen at the opposite end of the county the next night. The trouble was not limited to Sergeant Finney's jurisdiction alone. It was going on all over New England, and parts of New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania. Consultations with other State Police officials had brought about the conviction that there was some kind of syndicate at the head of this modern rustling enterprise.

Roads were patrolled, but with limited forces; it seemed the thieves always avoided the area where the patrols were in operation. A careful check of all-night diners, the hangouts of truck drivers on the road, revealed nothing. No strange trucks had appeared at separated places which in any way checked with the thefts. Road-blocks at unexpected locations had produced no results.

Farmers had begun to offer violent protests to the higher-ups in the Trooper barracks. Some groups of farmers had banded together to hire private investigators. Local sheriffs had organized posses to patrol the countryside. The men would be out for nights on end, and then gradually, as nothing happened, the force would dwindle. At just that moment the thieves would strike again.

Old Dave Greer had been one of the leaders among the farmers who had decided to take matters into their own hands. Dave had been fair enough.

"I know what you're up against, Finney," he'd say. "I know you're trying your best. But maybe we can find our own ways."

Time had gone by, and only a week ago Finney had seen Dave, and Dave had seemed optimistic. "I think we've got a lead," he said. "I wouldn't be surprised if something breaks pretty soon. When it does, we'll want you in on it, Finney. Need the law on our side. Be waiting to hear from me."

So Finney had heard from him — dead, stabbed in the back, his body trampled almost out of recognition. One thing Sergeant Finney was certain of: Lon was right. Old Dave had been killed because he was on the trail of the cattle thieves.

Finney took Paul Greer into the office back of the salesroom. It was the only place you could shut yourself away from people. Business had to go on at the window, but Mac Sperry and Esther Mulloy were handling that, Mac counting his endless stacks of bills. Finney took over Esther's desk at the back of the office where he could see everyone who might come in. He sat Paul down with his back to Esther and Mac.

"Cigarette?" Finney held out his pack.

"No, thanks," Paul said.

Finney lit one and leaned back in the chair. "Small towns aren't like any other place, Paul. You get to hear everything. It would knock your eye out if you could see the stack of complaints that come into our office — busybodies trying to get the law to

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interfere in private goings-on. Yes, sir, we get to hear everything."

Paul stared down at his boots in silence.

"You've been on the outs with Dave, lately," Finney said. "I've heard it in a dozen places. What was the trouble?"

"There was no trouble," Paul said.

"Then you weren't quarreling with him this afternoon?"

"No."

"Then what was it Mac and Hal Watson heard?"

"We were having an argument. We weren't quarreling."

Finney sighed. "You've been seen in a lot of strange places lately, Paul. Eating places out of town — bars, juke-box joints. You never used to go out that way."

"Is there a law against it?" Paul asked.

Finney shook his head. "I thought I knew you, Paul. I figured you for a steady, hard-working, progressive young farmer. I figured you and Esther'd get married, settle down, and take over old Dave's place. Lately — well, I don't know."

"My life is my own as long as I don't break the law, isn't it?"

"That's where we're at now, Paul," Finney said. "Was that your cane that was used to kill Dave?"

Paul looked straight at him. "I don't know. I don't know where my cane is. But I didn't use it to kill him, Finney."

"You didn't follow him from the dock down to the veal-calf pen?"

"No."

"Where did you go, Paul?"

"Out in the yard. I didn't go any place in particular."

"What was the argument about?"

Paul's lips tightened. "It was private and personal."

"About Esther?"

Paul was silent.

"I've heard Dave was upset over the way you've been treating Esther lately." Finney waited, but Paul didn't speak. "Okay, Paul; if you don't want to help yourself, I can't help you. For the time being you can figure yourself under arrest."

"On what charge?" Paul asked sharply.

Finney smiled at him. "Holding you as a material witness," he said. "Up to now you're the last person we know who saw old Dave alive. You can stay here in this office if you like. But don't take it into your head to take a powder on me. It would be just the same as a confession, Paul."

Joe Lucas ran into Lon Sanders just inside the Number Four dock. "Darn' kid ran out on me," he said. "Went to the rest-room, and came back into the buildings here. I don't know where he's got to."

Lon frowned thoughtfully. "Like to find him, Joe. I've got a hunch he knows more than he told us."

"You think so?" Joe looked away from the pale blue eyes.

"If he does, it isn't exactly the safest thing for him to be running around loose."

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"Safe?" Joe sounded startled.

"Somebody might want to shut him up," Lon said. "Let's circulate."

"Probably gone back to that calf of his," Joe said.

"Let's see."

Lon led the way back down the alley to the calf pen. The ring men were bringing them out now, one by one, to the sales ring and there was a great deal of stirring and confusion. Lon stood by the rail, looking in among the animals.

"Don't see him no place," he said.

One calf let out a particularly loud bleat and came over to where Lon and Joe stood. He stuck his nose through the rail and pushed at Joe. Joe rubbed his head, absently. "Charlie hasn't gone in yet," he said. "The kid would be with him if he was here."

"That the calf?" Lon asked.

"Yeah."

"Can you read the number on that ear clip?"

"Five eighty-two."

"Well, let's find the boy," Lon said.

They walked down to the end of the alley, where Hook Jaeger still stood guard. "You haven't seen the Richards boy anywhere, have you, Hook?"

"He came out of the rest room a little while ago," Hook said. "Went in toward the sales ring."

"Probably got himself a box seat to see the calf sold," Lon said.

He and Joe walked in to the edge of the ring and looked up at the rows of seats. Gerard wasn't there. Lon spoke to one of the handlers standing by, and was answered with a shrug.

"I don't like it," Lon said.

He walked over to the office window and spoke to Mac and Esther, who were inside. Neither of them had seen the boy.

"Probably outside somewhere," Mac said.

Just then Hal Watson joined them. His lips tightened when he heard about the missing boy. His dark eyes moved to the back of the office where Paul Greer sat alone.

"Well, what are we standing around for?" Watson said. "Let's find him."

"Lend us a hand, Mac," Lon said.

"You take over, Esther."

The four men crossed over to the end of the buildings.

"There's four rows of pens and stalls in these buildings," Lon said. "Let's each take a row and work from one end to the other. You take the outside, Mac. I'll take the next. You next, Joe, and then Watson."

"He's probably in the yard," Mac said, "listening to somebody's car radio."

Ten minutes later they met at the far end of the buildings. They had not found Gerard. Lon made no comment, but he stood for a long time, his chins sunk forward on his chest, thinking. "Probably scared," he muttered to no one in particular, "and hiding. Where would he hide? Some place small. Some place dark."

"Back of a truck," Watson suggested. "Maybe his own truck. Where is it, Joe?"

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They went out into the yard, but Gerard wasn't in the Richards' pick-up. They looked around, a little staggered at the prospect of searching two hundred and fifty trucks. Watson, as if driven by some internal urge, moved on to the one that was parked next to the Richards truck, and then to the next, a bright-red new pick-up.

"Lon!" Watson's voice was sharp and excited.

Lon walked over.

Watson was holding half of a cane — the crooked end — in his hand. His eyes glittered in the half darkness. "Look what I found here," he said.

Lon stared at the broken half of the cane. "Got any idea whose truck it is?" he asked.

Mac Sperry scuffed at the dirt with his shoe. "It's Paul Greer's," he said. "Just got it a week or ten days ago."

Lon's pale eyes were fixed, expressionlessly, on Watson. "Right handy for your cause, Hal, to find it in Paul's truck."

"You accusing me of framing him?" Watson blazed. "The next thing you'll be saying I stole my own cattle as a cover-up!"

"An interesting speculation, Hal," Lon said. He sighed. "Well, we better find Finney."

In the cashier's office Esther worked at the window, accepting money from buyers and filling out their consignment slips. Two clerks working at desks behind her made the permanent records of the sales. Paul Greer sat alone at the far end of the room.

From her window Esther saw a consignment of a dozen calves brought into the ring to be sold in one lot. She knew this would take several minutes, and she asked one of the clerks to take her place at the window and went back to where Paul was sitting. He looked up at her, misery in his eyes.

"Why don't you tell them?" Esther asked quietly.

He looked startled. "Tell them what?"

She sat down on the edge of the desk, close enough so that her hand could rest on his shoulder. "I'm a peculiar type girl," she said. "I waited a long time to fall in love. I couldn't make a mistake about the man I love."

"Apparently you have," Paul said, without looking up.

"To coin a phrase — tell it to the Marines," Esther said.

"Do you have to have a blueprint?" Paul asked.

There was an old, wise look on Esther's young face. "You've stood me up eight times, by actual count, in the last month. You seem to have taken to drink. I hear your friends aren't above reproach. I don't believe what any of it seems to mean."

"Esther!"

"I know you, Paul. I know you've had a reason for behaving as you have. I know how you really felt about Mr. Greer. If you were heard quarreling with him, I think it was a fake."

Paul looked up at her, a kind of wonder in his eyes.

"I love you, darling," Esther said. "I know you. You don't have to tell

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me what it's all about if you don't want to. You see, I figured out long ago what you were up to."

"Esther!" he said, his voice low.

"Can't you tell Finney the truth?" Esther asked.

"I can never prove it, now."

"Why not?"

"Because Dad was the only other person who knew it."

"And I wouldn't be a good witness for you, would I?"

"Esther, I love you," Paul said quietly. "When I get untangled from this we won't wait. We won't wait at all."

"Any time, any place, mister."

The clerk at the window called Esther. She hesitated a second, rumpling Paul's hair with her fingers. Then she went back to her job. Paul reached for his cigarettes, and his eyes were very bright as he watched Esther at the window. Then they clouded over as the office door opened and Sergeant Finney came in. The trooper walked straight back to the desk and stood in front of Paul, his jaw set.

"What have you done with the boy?" Finney asked.

"What boy?"

"Stop stalling, Paul. Where's Gerard Richards?"

"I haven't the faintest idea," Paul said. "The last I saw him Joe Lucas had him in tow."

"He ran away from Joe. You must have caught up with him."

"What do you mean — caught up with him?"

"We found your cane, Paul."

"Oh? Where was it?" Paul asked casually.

"The half of it that isn't in old Dave's back was in your pick-up," Finney told him.

Slowly, Paul rose to his feet. "What are you trying to pull off here, Finney?"

"Where's that boy?" the trooper demanded.

"Why don't you use your head?" Paul said, his voice rising. "He went out with Joe. You saw him go. I was with you. You brought me back here to question me, and I haven't left this office since."

Finney was silent, frowning. He was going back over it in his mind. Unless Paul had left the office in the last twenty minutes or so . . .

"Esther might lie for me," Paul said, "but not the other clerks. Ask them, why don't you?"

"Okay," Finney said. "Okay."

"Why would I want to harm the boy? I've always been fond of him," Paul said.

"The boy saw you kill Dave," Finney said.

"What!"

"You *were* close to the boy," Finney said. "I remember. He used to follow you around like a puppy."

"So what?"

"We had it figured wrong, that's all," Finney said. "We thought he was scared to talk, afraid someone might hurt him. It was because it was you — he didn't want to incriminate you. That's why he kept his mouth shut."

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"Listen to me — just once!" Paul said. "I didn't kill Dad. Gerard didn't see me, because I wasn't there. Gerard isn't protecting me. If he did see something he may very well be in danger."

"I guess not," Finney said. "You and Dave quarreled, Paul, and you threatened him. Right?"

"I was heard, so I guess there's no use denying it," Paul said.

"It was your cane and we found the broken half in your truck. Sooner or later the kid will talk. Meanwhile, I'm taking you to the barracks."

"Still a material witness?"

"The charge is murder," Finney said.

"What are you going to do about finding the kid?"

"He'll turn up," Finney said. "Let's go."

The trooper took Paul's arm and started him for the office door. Just as they reached it Lon Sanders wedged his bulk through it.

"I'm sorry it turned out this way, Paul," he said. "I'm real sorry."

Paul reached out and his fingers closed on the auctioneer's arm. "Lon! Don't stop looking for that boy," he said urgently. "Finney's making a fool of himself when he thinks Gerard's protecting me. If he saw something or knows something he's in trouble."

A small frown creased Lon Sanders' forehead. "I'd hate to think that, Paul."

"Well, *think* it! I don't care whether you believe me or not."

"You know how the kid idolized Paul," Finney said. "It's pretty clear the reason he was holding back was to protect Paul."

"It could be," Lon said thoughtfully. "I guess he'll turn up, all right."

Paul looked at Lon and saw the frown smooth out. Lon was satisfied. Paul moved, and it was lightning-fast. For an instant Lon was between him and Finney. In that instant he flung open the door and charged out through it.

"Paul!"

Finney reached for his holstered gun, and found Esther clinging to his gun arm.

"Are you out of your mind?" she cried. "Where can he go?"

"Sorry you did that, Esther," Finney said, shaking himself free. "It's aiding and abetting." Finney went racing out after Paul, blowing his whistle to summon his partner, who was out on the grounds.

Lon Sanders didn't move, not even when Esther tugged at his arm.

"Esther, get me the trucking records for the last month," he said, in a distant voice. "And the clippings on the cattle thefts."

"Lon! Are you just going to stand here? That crazy Finney may shoot Paul. Paul didn't kill Mr. Greer!"

"Do what I say, honey," Lon said gently. "I can't help Paul by runnin' after Finney. Can't run a lick."

A calf staggered blindly down the alley and into the scale pen that was to the left of the sales ring. The pen door

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slammed behind him. The needle on the big, white face of the scales went to 140 pounds.

"Veal calf, Number 582," the assistant auctioneer droned. "Weight, one forty. Okay, boys, let him out."

The ring end of the pen was opened and the calf half trotted, half stumbled out into the ring. He opened his mouth and wailed.

Under the rows of seats Gerard pulled the mildewed bag off the top of his head. He would have known Charlie's voice anywhere. Peering out toward the ring, between the legs of people in the seats, he saw Charlie flouncing around the ring, while the auctioneer began his call. This was it. This was the end for Charlie.

Gerard crept forward until he could stare out between a pair of blue-jeaned legs. Charlie was so frightened. You could see it in his wide brown eyes and hear it in his constant bleating.

"I got sixty, who'll give me sixty-one? I got sixty, sixty-one; sixty, sixty-one. *And* I got sixty-one, who'll give me sixty-two? Sixty-two? I got sixty-two; sixty-three? Sixty-two; sixty-three? *And* I got sixty-three — who'll make it sixty-four? Sixty-three; sixty-four? Sixty-three, sixty-four? *And* I got sixty-four —"

The bidding on Charlie was spirited. He was a fine veal calf.

Gerard was so intent on the movements of the black-and-white calf in the ring that he wasn't aware of a sudden murmur of excitement that began to grow outside the ring. He hardly noticed when the auctioneer pounded with his gavel and asked for a little quiet so the bidding could continue.

And then suddenly a man vaulted over the fence into the ring and, slapping Charlie out of his way, climbed up beside the auctioneer. He raised his hands for silence. "Listen, folks! Listen to me a minute!"

Gerard saw it was Hal Watson. In the floodlights Watson looked deathly pale and there was a kind of feverish light in his eyes.

"While this sale has been going on," Watson said to the crowd, "Dave Greer was murdered — stabbed in the back — in one of the pens at the rear of the building."

Voices rose in a low hum of excitement.

"The troopers have arrested Paul Greer for the murder." Watson had to plead for silence after that. "Please, listen! A small boy — the Richards boy — saw the murder. He's missing. And Paul Greer has just escaped from the troopers. He's somewhere around here. He may have harmed the boy. We've got to find him. If we give him time to get away we may never catch up with him!"

Feet scuffled over Gerard's head. People started to climb down from the seats.

"Wait! Listen to me!" Watson shouted. "There's one other thing you should know: Dave Greer was killed because he knew who's been stealing the cattle in these parts. He found out it was his own son!"

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That did it. The crowd stormed down out of the seats. Gerard heard himself trying to call out to Mr. Watson. It wasn't Paul Greer! Paul Greer wasn't the man in the alley. It was Joe — Joe Lucas. Gerard knew that because Charlie had told him.

But nobody could hear Gerard. Everything was forgotten except a manhunt for Paul Greer, who hadn't done anything. Even Charlie was forgotten, trotting in a frightened way around the ring. The place emptied as though it was on fire.

Gerard found himself deserted except for Charlie. He wriggled between the seats and out into the ring. For a moment Charlie didn't seem to recognize him, but when Gerard spoke to him softly he stood still and let Gerard come up to him. Gerard put his arm around Charlie's neck, and stood there, hanging onto him tightly.

"Gerard!"

The boy turned. Standing just outside the ring was Joe Lucas.

"Gerard! Where the heck have you been?" Joe asked, and started toward the ring.

It was made to order for Joe. There was no one in sight. Gerard could hear the excited voices outside on the grounds. No one would come back here. They knew Paul Greer wasn't in the sales ring.

Gerard let go of Charlie and started to move slowly, half backing, toward the scale pen.

"Gerard! Wait a minute!" Joe said sharply. He began to move faster. His hands were on the top rail of the ring fence and Gerard knew he would vault over it and come after him. Gerard turned and ran through the scale pen into the labyrinth behind it.

"Gerard!" Joe's voice was harsh and angry now.

The pens and alleys behind the sales ring were only dimly lit. Gerard had no idea what led where, but to get out of the building seemed his one chance of safety. He heard Joe's heavy boots come clattering through the scale pen. He was only a matter of yards behind.

"Gerard! Wait a minute!"

Gerard's heart pounded painfully against his ribs. He started down one alley and saw, at a last merciful second, that it ran into a dead end. He cut the other way, slipped on some wet shavings, and fell flat on his face.

"Gerard!"

Gerard scrambled up. He was crying now, unashamedly. But he ran, with all the waning strength in his legs. At the end of a long alley he saw an open door and, beyond it, darkness. If he could just make it! Joe's footsteps were closer, running hard. It seemed to Gerard he could almost hear the sound of Joe's heavy breathing.

He got to the door, with Joe, swearing angrily now, only ten or fifteen yards behind him. Gerard dived out the door onto a muddy patch of earth. To the right was the brightly lighted yard, swarming with excited people. To the left was darkness behind the buildings. Gerard didn't have time to think. Darkness

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seemed safer, somehow, than people. Gerard cut to his left, tottering a little, because he couldn't breathe very well any more.

He heard a violent thud, and Joe's profanity reached a hair-curling peak. Joe had fallen when he hit the wet patch of mud.

Gerard rounded the building. He couldn't see anything. It was pitch-black. Almost at once he stumbled over some trash. The buildings were set in the shelter of a high embankment. Gerard tried to climb it, but loose gravel and earth gave way under his feet and he slid back down on his hands and knees.

"Gerard!"

Joe had not lost him. Joe was rounding the building, heading toward him in the darkness. A sob choked up out of Gerard's throat. He turned toward the building and saw an oblong outline of light surrounding what might be a loose-fitting door. It was set in a little alcove and Gerard made for it. He knew, somehow, that he couldn't go any farther. He crouched there in the darkness, praying that Joe wouldn't see him and would go on past him.

A strong gust of wind swept down the space behind the building. Behind him Gerard heard the squeak of rusty hinges. The wind, he thought, had moved the ill-fitting door. Worst of all, as the door came open, light from inside cast a dim glow over his hiding place. Then, just as suddenly, the door closed again.

"*Gerard!*" Joe's pounding boots were almost upon him.

And then the unbelievable happened. An arm went round Gerard from behind, pinioning him, and a calloused hand was clapped over his mouth. A hoarse voice whispered in his ear, a voice he would never forget. But not Joe's! *Not Joe's!* Joe was still a few yards away, calling to him.

"Now we'll really find out what you did see, kid," the voice whispered.

Gerard tried to call to Joe from behind the calloused hand; Joe, who had seemed so dangerous and who now seemed the only hope left him. The hand dropped from his mouth, but he could make no sound, because the arm had gone round his throat, pulling his head back, choking the breath out of him. His eyes felt like hard marbles, about to pop out of his head.

Lon Sanders sat at one of the desks in the office, hunched over a thick notebook filled with penciled notations. Beside the book on the desk was a stack of worn newspaper clippings. He seemed completely absorbed, oblivious of the excited shouts outside in the yard and of Esther Mulloy, who stood beside him, pounding frantically at him with her fists.

"You can't just sit here and let it happen, Lon! They'll kill him if they find him!"

"Go away, honey," Lon said softly. He wet the point of a pencil with his tongue and made a note on a piece of blank paper.

"Lon! Listen to them! You're the only one who has any chance of stopping them!"

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"*Go away, Esther!*" The pale blue eyes turned on her and there was a cold fury in them.

Esther, shocked by the violence of it, stepped away and stood staring at him, bewildered. Then she turned and ran out of the office and into the yard.

A crowd turned loose is a frightening thing. Esther paused on the elevation of the Number One dock and looked out over the flood-lit yard. Groups of men, most of them crudely armed with sticks, pieces of old iron, even lengths of chain, were roistering from truck to truck, searching. Many of the trucks had already been loaded with animals for the return journey. Over the deep-throated sound of human excitement came the whinnying of horses, the mooing of cattle, the shrill barking of dogs that ran from group to group, caught up in the hysteria.

Beyond the perimeter of the light thrown by the floods, torches winked in the underbrush.

Someone spoke at Esther's elbow: "They'll get him. He hasn't got a chance."

It was Mac Sperry. "They've got road-blocks all round. Finney's sure he never had a chance to take off in a car, but they aren't running risks."

"Mac, isn't there some way this can be stopped?" Esther pleaded. "He didn't do it, you know. He's innocent."

"Why did he run, then?" Mac asked.

"Because he thought Gerard Richards was in danger and no one would listen to him!"

"You're a fine girl, Esther," Mac said. "Too bad you got tangled up with that no-good killer."

"He didn't kill anyone, Mac!"

Mac turned up his coat collar around his neck. The night was damp and chilly. "Sorry, Esther. Facts are facts." He left her to join one of the groups of searchers.

There was only one note of hope, as far as Esther was concerned. Every minute that passed meant that Paul had somehow found himself a hiding place. He couldn't keep dodging three or four hundred men for long. The fact that they hadn't caught up with him meant there was a chance he had got away. It wouldn't mean much in the long run, but right now the hysteria of the crowd was far more dangerous to Paul than incriminating evidence.

Off to the right there were shouts of warning. Someone had lowered the tailboard of a truck, and a heavy work horse, rearing and plunging, had torn loose from his tie rope, jumped down off the end of the truck, and was running wild, plunging and kicking through the crowd. Men shouted and waved at the charging horse to turn him out of their paths. Esther saw an old man go down as the horse veered his course and ran straight over him. People gathered round. Another horse had broken loose from the same truck and was rearing and striking out with his front feet at a man who'd caught his broken halter.

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For a matter of minutes everyone in the center of the yard concentrated on catching and subduing the two horses. It was during those moments that Esther saw Hal Watson running toward her.

"Esther, go back into the office and stay there!" he shouted at her. His face was white and streaked with sweat. "It isn't going to be pretty when they find him."

"You started this!" she accused. "You've got to stop it."

"Esther! The man killed his own father! He stole my cattle! Right now he may be doing away with that Richards kid!"

"That's nonsense, and you know it."

"Well, I warned you," Watson said. He turned and trotted back across the yard. The two escaped horses were under control and were being led into one of the pens inside the building. The search for Paul Greer began again, under a new head of steam.

Gerard opened his eyes in pitch-blackness. He had no idea where he was. Something was bound tightly over his mouth. He was lying on his back, and his arms, tied behind him, were bloodless and aching almost beyond endurance. He tried to move his feet. They were tied to something that felt like a metal bar. He tried to shift his position, and there was the creaking sound of protesting springs. He realized he was lying on some kind of broken-down bed. At the same moment that the springs squeaked, someone whispered in the darkness.

"Who's there?"

Gerard could only moan behind the gag. Someone stumbled against a piece of furniture, and a moment later hands touched Gerard, moved quickly over him as if trying to identify him by the feel. They moved up to the gag and pulled it down off his mouth. At the same moment a hand went over his mouth.

"Gerard?"

Gerard nodded his head violently.

"It's Paul," the voice whispered. Then the hand came away and Gerard was free to speak.

"Paul," Gerard whimpered. "I didn't see you. I swear it."

"Of course you didn't," Paul said. "I wasn't there." His fingers were working on the ropes that bound Gerard's feet. "Who brought you here, youngster? Who did this to you?"

"I don't know. Honest, Paul. All along I thought it was Joe. I was hiding from him, and then he saw me and I ran away because I thought it was him. Then someone else grabbed me from behind."

Paul had the foot ropes untied. "Roll over on your stomach, and I'll get those hands untied."

"Are they — are they still after you, Paul?"

"Listen to them!" Paul said. They could hear the voices, still shouting, still excited.

"Where are we?" Gerard asked.

"It's a room at the back of the barns," Paul said. "Lon's truck drivers use it when they get in with a load

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too late to go home. There are a couple of makeshift beds in here."

Gerard was free, and Paul rubbed his arms to get the circulation started. It was funny, because it was so dark Gerard couldn't even see an outline of Paul, who was right beside him on the bed.

"What happened back there, Gerard, when Dad was killed?" Paul asked.

Gerard told him. How he'd heard the screaming, and how he'd suddenly been grabbed from behind and then knocked out. He told how the same thing had happened again.

"Gee, my throat's awful sore where he choked me," Gerard said.

Paul was silent for a moment, his hand resting reassuringly on Gerard's knee. "I ought to turn you loose and have you go straight to Lon Sanders or Finney and let them know you're safe," he said.

"Please, Paul, I don't want to go away from you," Gerard said. "If you'd come with me —"

Paul's laugh was short. "All I've got to do is show my face to that mob!"

"Why doesn't anyone look for you here?" Gerard asked.

"Because I ran out of the buildings. They probably think I headed for the woods.

"Were you here when *he* brought me in?" Gerard asked.

"Lord, no, Gerard! I wish I had been, because then we'd know. I doubled back in the building and was ducking around there till I found this place, a couple of minutes ago. I didn't know you were here till I heard you move." Paul brought his hand down on Gerard's knee. "Listen! He's going to come back, sooner or later, to make sure you're still tied up. Gerard?"

"Yes, Paul."

"Have you got what it takes to stay here with me? To wait for him?"

"I g-guess so, Paul — if you say so."

"I shouldn't let you. But —"

"Paul! Listen!" Gerard whispered.

They both sat still, scarcely breathing. Slow, heavy footsteps were coming along the corridor outside.

"Quick!" Paul whispered. "Stretch out on the bed with your hands under you again."

"What are you going to do, Paul?"

"I'll be by the door. When he comes in to take a look at you I'll take him. Hurry!"

Gerard lay down with his hands under him. He still couldn't see anything.

"Just lie perfectly still," Paul whispered. Then Gerard heard him move toward the door.

A moment later the door slowly opened. There was hardly any light behind it, but there was just enough for Gerard to see who it was before the beam from a lighted torch suddenly blinded him. The huge figure of Lon Sanders filled the doorway.

The next moment the room was flooded with light and the door slammed shut behind Lon. Paul had spotted the light switch. At the same moment that he turned it on, he lunged at the auctioneer. His objective had been the iron-pointed cane Lon

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carried in his right hand. Paul was wiry and strong, but the big man stood like a colossus, his feet braced. Then he reached out with his left hand and pushed. It didn't seem to involve much effort, but Paul went hurtling back against the wall.

"So it *was* you!" Paul said, panting for breath.

"Don't be a fool," Lon said. "Is the kid all right?"

"Dad suspected you, Lon," Paul said, "when there was never any trace of out-of-town trucks. Who had trucks on the roads carrying livestock every day and night of the week in half a dozen states? Who would stop one of your trucks loaded with cattle? Everyone knew you. Honest Lon Sanders!"

"I tell you, don't be a fool," Lon said.

Paul seemed to be gathering himself together for another futile attack on the huge man at the door. The talk was calculated to let him choose his own moment.

"Who had an iron-pointed cane? You and I, Lon. You used yours, and when it broke, you picked mine up. You planted the broken piece in my truck. Then you let that mob loose on me. *You* could have stopped it, but you didn't. You let them get well started, and then you came here to finish off the kid. He saw you, didn't he, Lon? At least, you thought he did."

"Will you stop being an idiot?" Lon said. "I was on the stand all afternoon —"

"You often take a break — not more than a minute or two, but time enough. You could have had a confederate to warn you."

The two men stared at each other, motionless. Then Lon spoke again in his low, even voice:

"You're wrong, Paul. Your old man put me on the track. I said it had to be out-of-town trucks, and something about the way he answered me stuck in my head. I got thinking — just the way he did. My trucks, that pick up and deliver for this auction, could go anywhere, and nobody would question them. We're all over the county, all over five or six states, every day and night of the week. We know where the cattle are. We know the farms and the pasture lots just like the average man knows his own back yard. We could pick up cattle out of a pasture, drive 'em out of the county somewhere, transfer 'em to another truck, and go on about our legitimate business. If we were stopped by a road-block no one would suspect us. It could be worked, if you could reroute your trucks at the last minute to avoid trouble. And we *do* that! Our drivers call in every few hours to see if we want to reroute 'em in relation to new orders."

"So you're admitting it?" Paul said.

"I think it was my trucks," Lon said. "I've been checking our truck orders against the stealings. Each time one of our trucks was rerouted, it was into an area where a theft took place."

"You think you're going to get rid of me and the kid so we can't tell this?" Paul asked grimly.

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"You know," Lon said. "I'm tempted to tell Esther Mulloy she's tied up to a muttonhead! I—" He stopped abruptly, his head turned to one side. "Now keep still, or I may polish you off."

Deliberately he reached out and turned off the light switch, plunging the place into darkness. Outside, hurried footsteps approached the door. The door opened quickly and closed again. There was an agonized cry of pain. . . . The light switched on, and Lon stood there, holding Mac Sperry, the cashier, by the wrist. Mac was groveling.

"Stop, Lon! You're breaking my arm! What's the matter with you?"

Lon did not release his grip. "I came back here looking for you and the kid, Mac. I finally figured it." He turned to Paul: "You might slap him over a little. This kind of rat may just as likely be carrying a gun."

"Don't let him near me!" Mac cried. "He's a killer!"

"Hogwash," Lon said.

Paul went over Mac. In his hip pocket was a small revolver.

Lon went on, "I been going over the books, Mac. I got the whole thing figured out. Now we'll do a little talkin' and find out who the big shots are who were paying you off."

"I don't know what you're talking about. Honest, Lon."

"Okay, let's go," Lon said. "I'll tell my side of the story to that crowd out there and let them judge."

"No!"

Gerard had slid down off the bed and gone over to stand beside Paul. "All the time I thought it was Joe," he said. "Because Charlie told me."

"You did right to run from Joe, son," Lon said. "Mac here was the brains, but it was Joe's truck that Mac always rerouted to the key spots."

Paul's jaw muscles rippled. "Which one was it, Lon? Tell me — which one?"

"I got the answer to that," Lon said. "I checked on Joe. When Dave was killed he was helping the handlers in the Number One dock."

"But Charlie!" Gerard said. "I heard him, and I knew it had to be someone Charlie knew — and there was only Joe."

"I'll tell you something about animals, Mr. Richards," Lon said. "An animal that's hand-raised, like your Charlie, will holler at any human bein' for help when he's in trouble. He gets to trust 'em. Maybe you and Joe and your Ma was the only ones he ever hollered at before, but that's because no one else was ever around him. Right? But down here he'd have hollered at anyone. You was asleep, Mr. Richards, and Charlie was in trouble. When he saw Dave Greer and Mac in the alley, he left you and went over to them. Like I said, he trusted people. There was never a calf yet could name a man — or tell time!"

Lon looked down at the groveling Mac Sperry. "How was it, Mac? We'll get it out of you if we have to pull it out!"

On his knees, Mac rocked back and forth with the physical pain of his fear.

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"It was him," he said, nodding toward Paul. "All this play-actin' of his — hanging around saloons, talkin' loud about how he wanted to make a fast buck. It was an act that him and the old man figured out. Paul was tryin' to get in with the racket by talkin' out of turn."

Lon glanced at Paul, who nodded slowly.

"He and Dave were talkin' in the Number Four dock," Mac said. "I heard 'em when I went out to load the poultry crates. They were talkin' about your trucks, Lon. I figured the minute they started getting hot on that trail the whole thing would blow up. I ran into Hal Watson and I took him back with me. I wanted a witness. Dave and Paul were still talkin', but they must have spotted me, because they started this fake argument. I was sure, then, they suspected me."

"We didn't, as a matter of fact," Paul said. "We thought it was you, Lon. But we figured Mac was loyal to you, and we thought if he overheard us he might go to you."

"It wouldn't have mattered, once you sprang it," Mac said. "I knew I had to act fast. I figured if I got rid of the old man and framed you for his killing, nobody would believe you. So I ditched Hal, went back to the Number Four dock. I figured on following Dave and knocking him out with a bailing iron or something. But you helped me, Paul. You'd left your cane hanging over the top of the dock rail. I saw old Dave walking down the alley to the veal-calf pen."

Mac moistened his lips. "I — I took the cane and followed him. I crept up behind him and drove the cane into him. He — he screamed, something awful. I thought sure someone would come running. He staggered against the gate to the pen where that crazy cow was. I unlatched it and shoved him in.

"Then I saw this kid climbing over the fence from the calf pen. I didn't know if he'd seen me or not. I ducked down behind some baled hay, and when he walked past I grabbed him. The way he reacted I figured he hadn't seen anything. So I flattened him and got out of there before he could see who I was." Mac drew a gasping breath. "Soon as I could, I told Joe. The kid had already given him the slip and we kept hunting for him. 'Course I had to keep showing up now and then, or you'd have got suspicious. Then Joe spotted the kid. He signaled me. The kid ran, and Joe followed him. I went to cover the back way in case he circled round, and he walked right into my arms. I brought him here."

"What I can't figure," Lon said slowly, "is why you didn't finish him off if you thought he knew. That mob would have pinned it on Paul."

"I heard someone coming," Mac said. "So I tied him up and beat it, figuring to come back."

"It must have been me you heard," Paul said.

"And you, son," Lon said to Paul. "You'd have saved a lot if you'd talked out about yourself."

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"I know," Paul said. "But things happened so fast. I could see someone was planning to frame me. I thought if I kept my mouth shut I might catch him at the next move. Then when you found the planted cane in my truck, the boy was missing! It might have taken me hours to convince you. I couldn't risk what might happen to Gerard if he wasn't found fast."

Lon looked at Mac. "Twenty years you been working for me, Mac. Why? Why?"

Mac's voice rose: "Years and years I been counting your money, Lon — thousands and thousands of dollars every day. I wanted some for myself. They were paying me well, the guys behind this racket. They —"

"Let's get out of here," Lon said. "I feel kind of sick." He yanked Mac to his feet. Then he turned to Paul. "You two better stay here till I get that mob quieted and everything explained. I'll send Esther to you."

"I'm sorry, Lon," Paul said. "I'm sorry I had it wrong."

"Forget it, son. I am to blame in a way, letting it go on right under my big nose." He moved, and then stopped again. "And by the way, Mr. Richards, the money for that calf of yours is waiting for you in the cashier's office. Ninety-two dollars. Your Ma should be right proud of you."

"T-thank you, sir," Gerard said, his lips quivering.

Lon's pale eyes twinkled. "And when Paul and Esther are ready to take you home, Mr. Richards, you'll find that calf of yours in the back of Paul's truck." Lon's huge stomach jiggled in silent laughter. "A talking calf — even if it ain't so — ought to sort of be kept around as a curiosity, is the way I figure it."

Then Lon walked out, dragging Dave Greer's murderer behind him.

Note:

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One of the Old Master's funniest crime stories — a nugget of humorous Americana — and with a motive for murder so unusual that it is probably unique in the literature of crime . . .

MY WATCH

by MARK TWAIN

MY BEAUTIFUL NEW WATCH HAD run eighteen months without losing or gaining, and without breaking any part of its machinery or stopping. I had come to believe it infallible in its judgments about the time of day, and to consider its constitution and its anatomy imperishable. But at last, one night, I let it run down. I grieved about it as if it were a recognized messenger and forerunner of calamity. But by and by I cheered up, set the watch by guess, and commanded my bodings and superstitions to depart.

Next day I stepped into the chief jeweler's to set it by the exact time, and the head of the establishment took it out of my hand and proceeded to set it for me. Then he said, "She is four minutes slow — regulator wants pushing up." I tried to stop him, tried to make him understand that the watch kept perfect time. But no; all this human cabbage could see was that the watch was four minutes slow, and the regulator *must* be pushed up a little; and so, while I danced around him in anguish, and implored him to let the watch alone, the jeweler calmly and cruelly did the shameful deed.

My watch began to gain. It gained faster and faster day by day. Within the week it sickened to a raging fever, and its pulse went up to a hundred and fifty in the shade. At the end of two months it had left all the timepieces of the town far in the rear, and was a fraction over thirteen days ahead of the almanac. It was away into November enjoying the snow, while the October leaves were still turning. It hurried up house rent, bills payable, and such things, in such a ruinous way that I could not abide it.

I took it to the watchmaker to be regulated. He asked me if I had ever had it repaired. I said no, it had never needed any repairing. He looked a look of vicious happiness and eagerly pried the watch open, and then put a small dice-box into his eye and peered into its machinery. He said it wanted cleaning and oiling, besides regulating — come in a week.

After being cleaned and oiled, and regulated, my watch slowed down to that degree that it ticked like a tolling bell. I began to be left by trains, I failed all appointments, I got to missing my dinner; my watch

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strung out three days' grace to four and let me go to protest; I gradually drifted back into yesterday, then day before, then into last week, and by and by the comprehension came upon me that all solitary and alone I was lingering along in week before last, and the world was out of sight. I seemed to detect in myself a sort of sneaking fellow-feeling for the mummy in the museum, and a desire to swap news with him.

I went to a watchmaker again. He took the watch all to pieces while I waited, and then said the barrel was "swelled." He said he could reduce it in three days. After this the watch *averaged* well, but nothing more. For half a day it would go like the very mischief, and keep up such a barking and wheezing and whooping and sneezing and snorting that I could not hear myself think for the disturbance; and as long as it held out there was not a watch in the land that stood any chance against it. But the rest of the day it would keep on slowing down and fooling along until all the clocks it had left behind caught up again. So at last, at the end of twenty-four hours, it would trot up to the judges' stand all right and just in time. It would show a fair and square average, and no man could say it had done more or less than its duty.

But a correct average is only a mild virtue in a watch, and I took this instrument to another watchmaker. He said the king-bolt was broken. I said I was glad it was nothing more serious. To tell the plain truth, I had no idea what the king-bolt was, but I did not choose to appear ignorant to a stranger. He repaired the king-bolt, but what the watch gained in one way it lost in another. It would run a while and then stop a while, and then run a while again, and so on, using its own discretion about the intervals. And every time it went off it kicked back like a musket. I padded my breast for a few days, but finally took the watch to another watchmaker.

He picked it all to pieces, and turned the ruin over and over under his glass; and then he said there appeared to be something the matter with the hair-trigger. He fixed it, and gave it a fresh start. It did well now, except that always at ten minutes to ten the hands would shut together like a pair of scissors, and from that time forth they would travel together. The oldest man in the world could not make head or tail of the time of day by such a watch, and so I went again to have the thing repaired.

This person said that the crystal had got bent, and that the mainspring was not straight. He also remarked that part of the works needed half-soling. He made these things all right, and then my timepiece performed unexceptionably, save that now and then, after working along quietly for nearly eight hours, everything inside would let go all of a sudden and begin to buzz like a bee, and the hands would straightway begin to spin round and round so fast that their

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individuality was lost completely, and they simply seemed a delicate spider's web over the face of the watch. She would reel off the next twenty-four hours in six or seven minutes, and then stop with a bang.

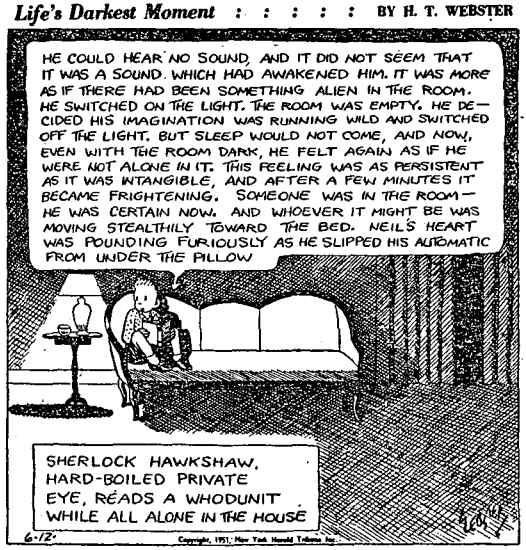
I went with a heavy heart to one more watchmaker, and looked on while he took her to pieces. Then I prepared to cross-question him rigidly, for this thing was getting serious. The watch had cost two hundred dollars originally, and I seemed to have paid out two or three thousand for repairs. While I waited and looked on I presently recognized in this watchmaker an old acquaintance — a steamboat engineer of other days, and not a good engineer, either. He examined all the parts carefully, just as the other watchmakers had done, and then delivered his verdict with the same confidence of manner.

He said: "She makes too much steam — what you want is to hang the monkey-wrench on the safety-valve!"

I brained him on the spot, and had him buried at my own expense.

My uncle William (now deceased, alas!) used to say that a good horse was a good horse until it had run away once, and that a good watch was a good watch until the repairers got a chance at it. And he used to wonder what became of all the unsuccessful tinkers, and gunsmiths, and shoemakers, and engineers, and blacksmiths; but nobody could ever tell him.

Life's Darkest Moment : : : : : BY H. T. WEBSTER


HE COULD HEAR NO SOUND, AND IT DID NOT SEEM THAT IT WAS A SOUND WHICH HAD AWAKENED HIM. IT WAS MORE AS IF THERE HAD BEEN SOMETHING ALIEN IN THE ROOM. HE SWITCHED ON THE LIGHT. THE ROOM WAS EMPTY. HE DECIDED HIS IMAGINATION WAS RUNNING WILD AND SWITCHED OFF THE LIGHT. BUT SLEEP WOULD NOT COME, AND NOW, EVEN WITH THE ROOM DARK, HE FELT AGAIN AS IF HE WERE NOT ALONE IN IT. THIS FEELING WAS AS PERSISTENT AS IT WAS INTANGIBLE, AND AFTER A FEW MINUTES IT BECAME FRIGHTENING. SOMEONE WAS IN THE ROOM — HE WAS CERTAIN NOW. AND WHOEVER IT MIGHT BE WAS MOVING STEALTHILY TOWARD THE BED. NEIL'S HEART WAS POUNDING FURIOUSLY AS HE SLIPPED HIS AUTOMATIC FROM UNDER THE PILLOW
SHERLOCK HAWKSHAW, HARD-BOILED PRIVATE EYE, READS A WHODUNIT WHILE ALL ALONE IN THE HOUSE
6-12
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WINNER OF A SECOND PRIZE

Earlier in this issue we gave you a triangle of prize-winning stories dealing with crime in the past, detection in the present, and mystery in the future. Now we give you Stanley Ellin's prize-winning story, "The House Party," and in a strange way it might be said that "The House Party" combines all three aspects of crime and chronology . . .

Stanley Ellin has been one of the outstanding prize-winners in EQMM's last seven annual contests. We doubt if there is a single reader who has forgotten the tremendous impact of horror from Mr. Ellin's very first story, "The Specialty of the House" — a truly classic "first." And surely many readers remember nearly as vividly the Ellin tales that followed — "The Cat's-Paw," "The Orderly World of Mr. Appleby," "Fool's Mate," "The Best of Everything," and "The Betrayers." Now we have a strong feeling that many readers will consider Stanley Ellin's new prize-winner, "The House Party," the finest short story Mr. Ellin has written since "The Specialty of the House" — if not perhaps the finest short story he has ever written . . .

It is time we made a confession about Stanley Ellin: we love that man's solid work. Year after year he grows in writing stature.

THE HOUSE PARTY

by STANLEY ELLIN

"He's coming around," said the voice.

He was falling. His hands were outflung against the stone cold blackness of space, and his body tilted head over heels, heels over head as he fell. If there were only a way of knowing what was below, of bracing himself against the moment of impact, the terror might not have been so great. This way he was no more than a lump of terror flung into a pit, his mind cowering away from the inevitable while his helpless body descended toward it.

"Good," the voice said from faraway, and it sounded to him as if someone were speaking to him quite calmly and cheerfully from the bottom of the pit. "Very good."

He opened his eyes. A glare of light washed in on him suddenly and painfully, and he squinted against it at the figures standing around him, at the faces, partly obscured by a sort of milky haze, looking down at him. He

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was lying on his back, and from the thrust of the cushions under him he knew he was on the familiar sofa. The milky haze was fading away now, and with it the panic. This was the old house at Nyack, the same living room, the same Utrillo on the wall, the same chandelier glittering over his head. *The same everything*, he thought bitterly, even to the faces around him.

That was Hannah, her eyes bright with tears — she could turn on tears like a faucet — and her hand was gripping his so hard that his fingers were numb under the pressure. Hannah with the overdeveloped maternal instinct, and only a husband to exercise it on . . . That was Abel Roth chewing on a cigar — even at a time like this, that reeking cigar! — and watching him worriedly. Abel with his first successful production in five years, worrying about his investment . . . And that was Ben Thayer and Harriet, the eternal bumpkins . . . And Jake Hall . . . And Tommy McGowan . . . All the old familiar faces, the sickening familiar faces.

But there was a stranger, too. A short stout man with a look of amiable interest on his face, and splendidly bald, with only a tonsure of graying hair to frame his gleaming scalp. He ran his fingers reflectively over his scalp, and nodded at Miles.

"How do you feel now?" he asked.

"I don't know," Miles said. He pulled his hand free of Hannah's, and gingerly tried to raise himself to a sitting position. Halfway there he was transfixed by a shocking pain that was driven like a white-hot needle between his ribs. He heard Hannah gasp, and then the stranger's blunt fingers were probing deep into the pain, turning it to liquid, melting it away.

"See?" the man said. "It's nothing. Nothing at all."

Miles swung his legs around so that he sat erect on the sofa. He took a deep breath, then another. "For a second I thought it was my heart," he said. "The way it hit me —"

"No, no," the man said. "I know what you thought. You can believe me when I say it is of no concern." And then, as if it explained everything, he said, "I am Dr. Maas. Dr. *Victor* Maas."

"It was a miracle, darling," Hannah said breathlessly. "Dr. Maas was the one who found you outside and brought you in. And he's been an absolute angel. If it weren't for him—"

Miles looked at her, and then looked at all the others standing there and watching him with concern. "Well," he demanded, "what *did* happen? What was it? Heart? Stroke? Amnesia? I'm not a child, for God's sake. You don't have to play games with me."

Abel Roth rolled his cigar from the left-hand corner of his mouth to the right-hand corner. "You can't blame him for feeling that way, can you, doc? After all, the man is out cold for fifteen minutes, he wants to know where he stands. Maybe there's some kind of checkup you could give him, like blood pressure and stuff like that. Maybe we'd all feel better for it."

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Miles relished that, and relished even more the thought of what he had in store for Abel Roth. "Maybe we would, Abel," he said. "Maybe we've got a theater sold out sixteen weeks in advance, and the SRO sign up every night. Maybe we've got a real little gold mine to dig so long as I can keep swinging the shovel eight performances a week."

Abel's face turned red. "Ah, now, Miles," he said. "The way you talk —"

"Yes?" Miles said. "What about the way I talk?"

Ben Thayer shook his head slowly and solemnly. "If you'd only take the chip off your shoulder for one minute, Miles," he drawled. "If you'd try to understand —"

"Please!" Dr. Maas said sharply. "Gentlemen, please!" He frowned at them. "There is one thing I must make clear. Actually, I am not a medical physician. My interests, so to speak, lie more in the field of psychiatrics, and while I am, perhaps, qualified to make the examination of Mr. Owen that you suggest, I have no intention of doing so. For Mr. Owen's benefit I will also say that there is no need for me or anyone else to do so. He has my word on that."

"And Dr. Maas, I am sure," said Miles, "is an honorable man." He stood up flexing his knees gingerly, and noting the relief on the faces around him. "If you want to make yourself at home, doctor, go right ahead. There seems to be some kind of buffet over there, and while I can't vouch for the food I can promise that the liquor is very, very good."

The doctor's grin gave him a surprising resemblance to a plump and mischievous boy. "A delightful suggestion," he said, and immediately made his way toward the buffet. Abel followed, and, Miles observed, before the doctor had even reached the buffet, the cigar was perilously close to his ear. Abel spent three hours a week on a psychoanalyst's couch, and at least as much time pouring out lists of frightening and inconsequential symptoms to a sleek and well-fed Park Avenue practitioner. Dr. Maas, Miles thought with a wry sympathy, was in for some heavy going, whether he knew it or not.

The rest of the circle around the sofa broke up and eddied off, until only Hannah was left. She caught his arm in a panicky grip.

"Are you *sure* you're all right?" she demanded. "You know you can tell me if there's anything wrong."

There was something wrong. Every time she caught hold of him like that, tried to draw him close, he had the feeling of a web ensnaring him, closing over him so that he had to fight it savagely.

It had not been like that at the start. She had been so beautiful that he thought in her case it might be different. The rising together, the eating together, the talking together, the endless routine of marriage looked as if it might somehow be bearable as long as it was shared with that loveliness. But then after a year the loveli-

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ness had become too familiar, the affection too cloying, the routine too much of a crushing burden.

He had been unconscious for fifteen minutes. He wondered if he had babbled during that time, said something about Lily that could be seized on as a clue. It wasn't of much concern if he had; in fact, it might have been a good way of preparing Hannah for the blow. It was going to be quite a blow, too. He could picture it falling, and it wasn't a pleasant picture.

He shrugged off Hannah's hand. "There's nothing wrong," he said, and then could not resist adding, "unless it's this business of your throwing a house party the one time of the week when I might expect a little peace and quiet."

"I?" Hannah said uncertainly. "What did *I* have to do with it?"

"Everything, as long as you've got that damn yen to be the perfect hostess and everybody's friend."

"They're *your* friends," she said.

"You ought to know by now that they're not my friends either. I thought I made it clear a hundred different ways that I hate them all, individually and collectively. They're nobody's friends. Why is it my obligation to feed them and entertain them the one time of the week I can get rid of them?"

"I don't understand you," Hannah said. She looked as if she were about to break into tears. "I know you bought the house up here so you could get away from everybody, but you were the one —"

The web was closing in again. "All *right*," he said. "All *right!*"

The whole thing didn't matter, anyhow. After he cleared out she could throw a house party every night of the week if she wanted to. She could burn the damn house down if that suited her. It wasn't of any concern to him. He'd had enough of this country-squire life between every Saturday and Monday performance to last him the rest of his life, and, as Lily had once remarked, Central Park had all the trees she wanted to see. Just the realization that he would soon be packed and out of here made any arguments pointless.

He shouldered his way to the buffet past Bob and Liz Gregory who were mooning at each other as if doing it on the radio six mornings a week wasn't enough; past Ben Thayer who was explaining to Jake Hall the trouble he was having with the final act of his new play; past Abel who was saying something to Dr. Maas about psychosomatic factors. The doctor had a tall glass in one hand, and a sandwich in the other. "Interesting," he was saying. "Very interesting."

Miles tried to close his ears to all of them as he poured down two fingers of bourbon. Then he looked at his glass with distaste. The stuff was as flat as warm water, and as unpleasant to the palate. Obviously, one of the local help who took turns cleaning up the house had found the key to the liquor cabinet, and, after nearly emptying the bottle, had done a job on it at the kitchen tap. Damn fool. If

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you're going to sneak a drink, do it and forget it. But to ruin the rest of the bottle this way . . .

Abel poked him in the ribs. "I was just telling the doctor here," Abel said, "if he gets an evening off I'll fix him up with a house seat for *Ambuscade*. I was telling him, if he hasn't seen Miles Owen in *Ambuscade* he hasn't seen the performance of all time. How does that sound to you, Miles?"

Miles was lifting another bottle after making sure its seal was unbroken. He looked at Abel, and then set the bottle down with great care.

"As a matter of fact," he said, "I don't know how it sounds to me, Abel. It's something I've wanted to talk to you about, and maybe this is as good a time as any."

"Talk about what?" said Abel cheerfully, but there was a sudden worry in his eyes, a flickering of premonition on his face.

"It's private business, Abel," Miles said, and nodded to Dr. Maas who stood by interestedly. "That is, if the doctor will excuse us."

"Of course, of course," the doctor said quickly. He waved his glass enthusiastically toward Miles. "And you were altogether right about the liquor, Mr. Owen. It is superb."

"Fine," Miles said. "This way, Abel."

He pushed his way through the crowd and crossed the room to the library, Abel trailing after him. When he closed the door of the library and switched on a lamp, the chill dampness of the room seemed to soak right into him, and he shivered. Logs and kindling had been laid on the fireplace, and he held a match to it until the wood crackled and caught. Then he lit a cigarette and drew deeply on it. He looked at the cigarette in surprise. There was a flatness about it, a lack of sensation which made him run his tongue over his lips questioningly. He drew again on the cigarette, and then flung it into the fire. First the liquor, he thought, and now this. Dr. Maas might be a handy man with Freudian complexes, but the first thing Monday an honest-to-God M.D. would be checking up on this little problem. It is discomforting to find out suddenly that you've lost your capacity to taste anything. Ridiculous maybe, but still discomforting.

Abel was standing at the window. "Look at that fog, will you. When I brought *Coxcomb* over to London I thought I saw the real thing there, but this makes it look like nothing. You could cut your way through this with a shovel."

The fog was banked solidly outside the window, stirring in slow waves, sending threads of damp smoke against the glass. Where the threads clung, little beads of water trickled down the pane.

"You get that around here a couple of times a year," Miles said impatiently. "And I didn't come in here to talk about the weather."

Abel turned away from the window and sat down reluctantly in an armchair. "No, I guess you didn't. All

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right, Miles, what's bothering you?"

"*Ambuscade*," Miles said. "*Ambuscade* is what's bothering me."

Abel nodded wearily. "It figured. It figured. Well, what particular thing? Your billing? We're using the biggest letters they make. Your publicity? All you have to do is name the time and you have your pick of any TV or radio guest spot in town. Remember what I told you after opening night, Miles? You name it, and if I can get it for you, I will."

Miles found himself suddenly enjoying the scene. Ordinarily, he had a genuine horror of such scenes. "Funny," he said. "I didn't hear you say anything about money just now, did I? I mean, in all that pretty speech it couldn't have slipped past me, could it?"

Abel sank down in his chair and sighed like a man deeply stricken. "I thought it would come down to this. Even if I'm paying you twice as much as the biggest star I ever had, I could see it coming, Miles. All right, what's the beef?"

"As a matter of fact," Miles said, "there's no beef."

"No?"

"None at all."

"What are you geeting at?" Abel demanded. "What's all this about?"

Miles smiled. "I'm not getting *at* anything, Abel. I'm getting *out*. I'm leaving the show."

Miles had seen Abel meet more than one crisis before; he could have predicted every action before it took place. The face becoming an impassive mask, the hand searching for a match, the thumbnail flicking the match into a light, the elaborate drawing on the cigar stump, the neat flick of the match across the room. Abel fooled him. The match was snapped with sudden violence between the fingers, and then slowly rolled back and forth, back and forth.

"You're a cute boy, Miles," Abel said. "This wouldn't be your idea of a joke, would it?"

"I'm getting out, Abel. Tonight was positively the last appearance. That gives you all day tomorrow to line up another boy for the Monday-night curtain."

"What other boy?"

"Well, you've got Jay Welker on tap, haven't you? He's been understudying me for five months, and hoping I'd break a leg every night of it."

"Jay Welker couldn't carry *Ambuscade* one week, and you know it, Miles. Nobody can carry that show but you, and you know that, too."

Abel leaned forward in his chair and shook his head from side to side unbelievingly. "And knowing that, you don't give a damn. You'd close the biggest thing on Broadway just like that, and to hell with the whole world, is that it?"

Miles felt his heart starting to pound heavily, his throat tightening. "Wait a second, Abel, before you start on the dirty words. One thing has already come through pretty well. In all this, you haven't yet asked me why I'm leaving. For all you know I

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might have some condition that's going to kill me an hour from now, but that would bother you less than keeping your show running! Have you thought about that side of it?"

"What side of it? I was standing right there when the doctor said you were in good shape. What am I supposed to do now? Get affidavits from the American Medical Association?"

"Then it's your idea that I'm pulling out because of a whim?"

"Let's not kid each other, Miles. You did this to Barrow five years ago, you did it to Goldschmidt after that, you did it to Howie Freeman last year, and I know, because that's how I got my chance to grab you for *Ambuscade*. But all the time I figured these others didn't know how to handle you, they didn't see just how much you meant to a show. Now I tell you they were right all along, and I was a prize sucker. They told me you would be going along fine, and then all of a sudden you would get a bug in your ear, and that was it. Bug in your ear, Miles. That's my low, ignorant way of saying whim, which is what it adds up to."

Abel paused. "The difference between me and them, Miles, is that I didn't take chances, and that's why you signed the first run-of-the-play contract you ever got since you were a nobody. You think you're walking out on that contract? Think again, my friend."

Miles nodded. "All right," he said thickly, "I'm thinking. Do you want to know about what?"

"They're your dice, my friend."

"I'm thinking about eight performances a week, Abel. Eight times a week I say the same lines, walk the same steps, make the same faces. I've done it for five months, which is the biggest break you ever got in your life, but if you had your way I'd be doing it for five years! Right now it's turned into one of those nightmares where you do the same thing over and over without being able to stop, but you wouldn't know about that because *you're* a guy in love with routine! But *I'm* not! After a while it's like being in jail with the key thrown away. What do you tell a man when he can walk out of jail? To stay there and like it?"

"Jail!" Abel cried. "Tell me somebody in this country who wouldn't give his right eye to be in the kind of jail you're in!"

"Listen," Miles said. He leaned forward urgently. "Do you remember before the show opened when we were rehearsing that kitchen scene? Do you remember when we ran through it that night ten times, fifteen times, twenty times? Do you know how I felt then? I felt as if I was plunked right down in hell, and all I would do for eternity was just play that scene over and over again. That's my idea of hell, Abel: a sweet little place where you do the same thing over and over, and they won't even let you go nuts at it, because that would spoil the fun for them. Do you get that? Because if you do, you can see just how I feel about *Ambuscade!*"

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"I get it," Abel said. "I also get a certain little run-of-the-play contract tucked away in my safe deposit box. If you think rehearsing a scene a few times is hell you'll find out different when Equity lands on you. They look at this a little different from you."

"Don't try to scare me, Abel."

"Scare you, hell. I'm going to sue you black and blue, and I'm going to make it stick. I'm dead serious about that, Miles."

"Maybe. But isn't it hard to sue a man who's too sick to work?"

Abel nodded with grim understanding. "I figured you'd get around to that angle. I'm the patsy, because to the rest of the world you're sick." His eyes narrowed. "And that explains something else, too. That little business of your little blackout on the front doorstep, with a doctor handy, and twenty witnesses to swear to it. I have to hand it to you, Miles, you don't miss a trick. Only it'll take more than a smart trick and a quack doctor to work things your way."

Miles choked down the rage rising in him. "If you think that was a trick —!"

"What was a trick?" Harriet Thayer's voice said gaily behind him. Harriet and Ben were standing in the doorway, regarding him with a sort of cheerful curiosity. They made an incongruous couple, Ben's gauntness towering high over Harriet's little-girl fragility, and they had an eager, small-town friendliness that grated on Miles's nerves like a fingernail drawn down a slate. "It sounds terribly exciting and interesting," Harriet said. "Don't let us stop you."

Abel pointed at Miles with a shaking forefinger. "This'll stop you all right," he said, "and I'll give it to you in one line. Our friend here is walking out on *Ambuscade*. Maybe *you* can do something to change his mind!"

Ben stared with slow incredulity, and Miles had to marvel, as he had done so many times before, that any man who could write even the few good lines to be found in *Ambuscade* could be so slow on his feet.

"But you can't," Ben said. "Your contract runs as long as the play does."

"Sure," Abel jeered, "but he's a sick man. He falls down and has fits. You saw him, didn't you?"

Harriet nodded dumbly. "Yes, but I never thought —"

"And you were right," Abel said. "He's faking it. He's just fed up with making all that money and having all those nice things printed about him, so he's going to close the show. That's all. Just fold it up tight."

Miles slammed his hand down hard on the arm of Abel's chair. "All right," he said, "now that you've made everything so clear I'll ask you something. Do you think if *Ambuscade* was really a good play that any one person could close it up? Did it ever strike you that no one comes to see your crummy play; they come to see me walk through it? If you gave me *Jabberwocky* to read up there they'd come to see me! Who's to tell a one-man show that he has to keep playing when he doesn't want to!"

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"It *is* a good play!" Harriet shouted at him. "It's the best play you ever acted in, and if you don't know that —"

Miles was shouting himself now. "Then get someone else to play it! It might be even better that way!"

Ben held his hands out, palms up, in a pleading gesture. "Now, Miles, you know you've been identified with that part so no one else could take it over," he said. "And try to see it my way, Miles. I've been writing fifteen years, and this is the first real break —"

Miles walked up to him slowly. "You clown," he said softly. "Don't you have any self-respect at all?"

When he walked out of the library he quickly slammed the door behind him to forestall any belated answer to that.

The party had broken into several small knots of people scattered around the room, a deafening rise and fall of voices, a haze of blue smoke which lay like a transparent blanket midway between floor and ceiling. Someone, Miles observed, had overturned a drink on the piano; the puddle ran down in a glittering string along the side of the mahogany and was leaving a damp stain on the Wilton rug beneath. Tommy McGowan and his latest, an overripe blonde — Norma or Alma or something — sat on the floor shuffling through piles of phonograph records, arranging some into a dangerously high stack, and carelessly tossing the others aside. The buffet looked as if a cyclone had hit it; only some empty platters and broken pieces of bread remained amidst the wreckage. From the evidence, Miles thought sardonically, the party would have to be rated a roaring success.

But even the sense of heat and excitement in the room could not erase the chill that he seemed to have brought with him from the library. He rubbed his hands together hard, but this didn't help any, and he felt a small pang of fright at the realization. What if there really were something wrong with him? Lily was not the kind of woman to take gracefully to the role of nursemaid to an invalid. Not that she was wrong about that, as far as he was concerned; if the shoe were on the other foot he couldn't see himself playing any Robert Browning to her Elizabeth Barrett either. Not for Lily or anyone else in the world. In that case it was better not to even bother about a checkup. If there was something, he didn't even want to know about it!

"You are disturbed about something, I think."

It was Dr. Maas. He was leaning casually against the wall, not an arm's length away, his hands thrust into his pockets, his eyes fixed reflectively on Miles. Taking in everything, Miles thought angrily, like some damn scientist looking at a bug under a microscope.

"No," Miles snapped. Then he thought better of it. "Yes," he said. "As a matter of fact, I am."

"Ah?"

"I don't feel right. I know you told me I was fine, but I don't feel fine."

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"Physically?"

"Of course, physically! What are you trying to tell me? That it's all in my mind, or some claptrap like that?"

"I am not trying to tell you anything, Mr. Owen. You are telling me."

"All right. Then I want to know what makes you so sure of yourself. No examination, no X-ray, no anything, and you come up with your answer just like that. What's the angle here? Do we somehow get around to the idea that there's nothing wrong physically, but if I put myself in your hands for a nice long expensive psychoanalysis —"

"Stop right there, Mr. Owen," Dr. Maas said coldly. "I will take for granted that your manners are abominable because you are clearly under some pressure. But you should rein in your imagination. I do not practice psychoanalysis, and I never said I did. I am not a healer of any sort. The people I deal with are, unfortunately, always past the point of any cure, and my interest in them, as you can see, must be wholly academic. To be taken for some kind of sharper seeking a victim —"

"Look," Miles said abruptly, "I'm sorry. I'm terribly sorry. I don't know what made me go off like that. Maybe it's this party. I hate these damn parties; they always do things to me. Whatever it is, I'm honestly sorry for taking it out on you."

The doctor nodded gravely. "Of course," he said. "Of course." Then he nervously ran his fingers over his shining scalp. "There is something else I should like to say. I am afraid, however, I would risk offending you."

Miles laughed. "I think you owe it to me."

The doctor hesitated, and then gestured toward the library. "As it happens, Mr. Owen, I heard much of what went on in there. I am not an eavesdropper, but the discussion got a little — well, heated shall we say? — and it was impossible not to overhear it from outside the door here."

"Yes?" Miles said warily.

"The clue to your condition, Mr. Owen, lies in that discussion. To put it bluntly, you are running away. You find what you call routine unbearable, and so you are fleeing from it."

Miles forced himself to smile. "What do you mean, what *I* call routine? Is there another word for it in your language?"

"I think there is. I think I would call it responsibility. And since your life, Mr. Owen — both your profession and your private life — are very much an open book to the world, I will draw on it and say that most of this life has also been spent fleeing from responsibility of one sort or another. Does it strike you as strange, Mr. Owen, that no matter how far and fast you run you always find yourself facing the same problem over and over again?"

Miles clenched and unclenched his fist. "After all," he said, "it's my problem."

"That is where you're wrong, Mr. Owen. When you suddenly leave your role in a play, it affects everyone con-

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cerned with that play, and, in turn, everyone concerned with those people. In your relations with women you may move on, but they do not stay motionless either. They move on, too, dangerous to themselves and perhaps to others. Forgive me if I seem sententious, Mr. Owen, but you cannot cast pebbles in the water without sending ripples to the far shore.

"That is why when you say *routine*, it is because you are thinking only of yourself caught in a situation. And when I say *responsibility*, I am thinking of everyone else concerned with it."

"And what's the prescription, Doctor?" Miles demanded. "To stay sunk in a private little hell because if you try to get away you might step on somebody's toes in the process?"

"Get away?" the doctor said in surprise. "Do you really think you can get away?"

"You've got a lot to learn, Doctor. Watch me and see."

"I am watching you, Mr. Owen, and I do see. In a wholly academic way, as I said. It is both fascinating and bewildering to see a man trying to flee, as he calls it, his private little hell, while all the time he is carrying it with him."

Miles's hand was half raised, and then it dropped limp at his side. "In other words, Doctor," he said mockingly, "you're replacing the good old-fashioned sulphur and brimstone hell with something even bigger and better."

The doctor shrugged. "Of course, you don't believe that."

"No," Miles said. "I don't."

"I have a confession to make, Mr. Owen." The doctor smiled, and suddenly he was the plump and mischievous boy again. "I knew you wouldn't. In fact, that is why I felt free to discuss the matter with you."

"In an academic way, of course."

"Of course."

Miles laughed. "You're quite a man, Doctor. I think I'd like to see more of you."

"I am sure you will, Mr. Owen. But right now I believe that someone is trying to attract your notice. There, by the door."

Miles followed the doctor's gesturing finger, and his heart stopped. All he could do was pray that no one else had noticed, as he swiftly crossed the room and blocked off the woman who was entering it from the hallway that led to the front door. He thrust her back against the door, and catching hold of her shoulders he shook her once, sharply and angrily.

"Are you crazy?" he demanded. "Don't you have any more sense than to show up here like this?"

She twisted her shoulders away from his grasp, and carefully brushed at the collar of her coat with her fingertips. The coat had cost Miles a month's pay.

"Aren't you sweet, Miles. Do you invite all your guests in this way?"

Even in the dimness of the hallway she was startling to look at. The sulky lips against the gardenia pallor of the face, the high cheek bones, the slanted eyes darting fire at him. He quailed.

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"All right, I'm sorry. I'm sorry. But, my God, Lily, there are two dozen of the biggest mouths on Broadway in that room. If you want the whole world to know about this, why don't you just tip off Winchell!"

She knew when she had him beaten. "I don't like that, darling. I don't like that at all. I mean, to make it sound as obscene and disgusting as all that. It really isn't supposed to be like that, is it?"

"You know damn well it isn't like that, Lily. But use your head, will you? There is such a thing as discretion."

"There's also such a thing as working a word to death, darling. And I don't mind telling you that in the last two months you've filled me up to here with that one."

Miles said angrily, "I've been trying to make it clear that we'd work this thing out in the right way at the right time. I've already told Abel I was leaving the show. I was going to talk to Hannah, too, but this party has fouled everything up. Tomorrow, when I can be alone with her —"

"Ah, but tomorrow may be a long time away, darling. Much longer than you realize."

"What exactly does that mean?"

She fumbled through her purse and drew an envelope from it. She waved the envelope back and forth under his nose with a fine air of triumph.

"It means this, Miles. Two pretty little reservations, outward bound, for tomorrow's sailing. You see, you don't have nearly as much time as you thought, do you, darling?"

"Tomorrow! The agent said he couldn't possibly have anything for us within a month!"

"He didn't count on cancellations. This one came through just two hours ago, which is exactly how long it took me to get here. And if it wasn't for that awful fog on the road I would have been here that much sooner. I have the car outside, Miles. You can pack whatever is handy, and get the rest of what you need on the boat. When I go back I expect you to be with me, Miles, because whether you are or not I'll be sailing tomorrow. You can't really blame me for that, can you, darling? After all, none of us are getting any younger."

He tried to straighten out the aching confusion of his thoughts. He wanted to escape Hannah's web, and now it seemed, somehow or other, there was another waiting to be dropped around him. Running, the doctor had said. Always running and never getting anywhere. There was a great weight of weariness in his arms, his legs, his whole body. Running did that to you.

"Well," Lily said, "make up your mind, darling."

He rubbed his hand over his forehead. "Where's the car?"

"Right across the road."

"All right," Miles said, "you wait in it. Just stay there, and don't blow the horn for me, or anything like that. I'll be down in ten minutes. Fifteen minutes at the most. Most of my stuff

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is in town, anyhow. We'll pick it up on the way to the boat."

He opened the door and gently pushed her toward it.

"You'll have to feel your way to the car, Miles. I've never seen anything like what's outside."

"I'll find it," he said. "You just wait there."

He closed the door, then leaned against it fighting the sickness that kept rising to his throat. The loud voices in the next room, the shrieks of idiot laughter that now and then cut through it, the roar of music from the phonograph tuned at its greatest volume — everything seemed conspiring against him, not allowing him to be alone, not allowing him to think things out.

He went up the stairs almost drunkenly, and into the bedroom. He pulled out his valise, and then at random started cramming it full. Shirts, socks, the contents of the jewel case on his dresser. He thrust down hard with all his weight, making room for more.

"What are you doing, Miles?"

He didn't look up. He knew exactly what the expression on her face would be, and he didn't want to meet it then. It would have been too much.

"I'm leaving, Hannah."

"With that woman?" Her voice was a vague, uncomprehending whisper.

He had to look at her then. Her eyes stared at him, enormous against the whiteness of her skin. Her hand fumbled with the ornament at her breast. It was the silver mask of comedy he had picked up for her on Fifth Avenue a week before their marriage.

She said wonderingly, "I saw you with her in the hallway. I wasn't prying or anything like that, Miles, but when I asked the doctor where you were —"

"Stop it!" Miles shouted. "What do you have to apologize for!"

"But she's the one, isn't she?"

"Yes, she's the one."

"And you want to go away with her?"

His hands were on the lid of the valise. He rested his weight on them, head down, eyes closed.

"Yes," he said at last. "That's what it comes to."

"No!" she cried with a sudden fervor. "You don't really want to. You know she's not good for you. You know there's nobody in the whole world as good for you as I am!"

He pressed the lid of the valise down. The lock caught with a tiny click.

"Hannah, it would have been better for you not to have come up just now. I would have written to you, explained it somehow —"

"Explained it? When it would be too late? When you'd know what a mistake you made? Miles, listen to me. Listen to me, Miles. I'm talking to you out of all my love. It would be a terrible mistake."

"I'll have to be the judge of that, Hannah."

He stood up, and she came toward him, her fingers digging into his arms frantically. "Look at me, Miles," she whispered. "Can't you see how I feel?

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Can't you understand that I'd rather have the both of us dead than to have you go away like this and leave the whole world empty for me!"

It was horrible. It was the web constricting around him so hard that it was taking all his strength to pull himself free. But he did, with a brutal effort, and saw her fall back against the dresser. Then she suddenly wheeled toward it, and when she faced him again he saw the pistol leveled at him. It shone a cold, deadly blue in her hand, and then he realized that her hand was trembling so violently that the gun must be frightening her as much as it did him. The whole grotesquerie of the scene struck him full force, melting away the fear, filling him with a sense of outrage.

"Put that thing down," he said.

"No." He could hardly hear her. "Not unless you tell me that you're not going."

He took a step toward her, and she shrank farther back against the dresser, but the gun remained leveled at him. She was like a child afraid someone was going to trick her out of a toy. He stopped short, and then shrugged with exaggerated indifference.

"You're making a fool of yourself, Hannah. People are paid for acting like this on the stage. They're not supposed to make private shows of themselves."

Her head moved from side to side in a slow, aimless motion. "You still don't believe me, do you, Miles?"

"No," he said. "I don't."

He turned his back on her, half expecting to hear the sudden explosion, feel the impact between his shoulder blades, but there was nothing. He picked up the valise and walked to the door.

"Goodbye, Hannah," he said. He didn't turn his head to look at her.

The weakness in his knees made each step a trial. He stopped at the foot of the staircase to shift the valise from one hand to the other, and saw Dr. Maas standing there, hat in hand, a topcoat thrown over his arm.

"Ah?" said the doctor inquiringly. "So you, too, are leaving the party, Mr. Owen?"

"Party?" Miles said, and then laughed short and sharp. "Leaving the nightmare, if you don't mind, Doctor. I hate to tell this to a guest, but I think you'll understand me when I say that this past hour has been a nightmare that gets thicker and thicker. That's what I'm leaving, Doctor, and you can't blame me for being happy about it."

"No, no," said the Doctor. "I quite understand."

"The car is waiting for me outside. If I can give you a lift anywhere —?"

"Not at all," the doctor said. "I really do not have far to go."

They went to the doorway together and stepped outside. The fog moved in on them, cold and wet, and Miles turned up his jacket collar against it.

"Rotten weather," he said.

"Terrible," the doctor agreed. He glanced at his watch, and then lumbered down the steps to the walk like a walrus disappearing into a snow-

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bank. "I'll be seeing you, Mr. Owen," he called.

Miles watched him go, then lifted the valise and went down the steps himself, burying his nose in his collar against the smothering dampness all around him. He was at the bottom step when he heard the sibilance of the door opening behind him, the faraway whisper of danger in his bones.

He turned, and, as he knew it would be, there was Hannah standing at the open door, still holding the gun. But the gun was gripped tightly in both hands now, and the menace of it was real and overwhelming.

"I tried to make you understand, Miles," she said, like a child saying the words. "I tried to make you understand."

He flung his arms out despairingly.

"No!" he cried wildly. "No!"

And then there was the roar of the explosion in his ears, the gout of flame leaping out toward him, the crushing impact against his chest, and the whole world dissolving. In it, only one thing stood sharp and definable: the figure of the doctor bending over him, the face strangely Satanic in its cruel indifference.

For that single moment Miles understood everything. He had been here before. He had lived this hour a thousand times before, and would live it again and again for all eternity. The curtain was falling now, but when it rose again the stage would be set once more for the house party. Because he was in Hell, and the most terrible thing of all, the terror which submerged all others, was this moment of understanding given him so that he could know this, and could see himself crawling the infinite treadmill of his doom. Then the darkness closed in with a rush, blotting out all understanding — until next time . . .

"*He's coming around,*" *said the voice.*

He was falling. His hands were outflung . . .

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EQMM's DETECTIVE DIRECTORY

edited by ROBERT P. MILLS

THE WAIKIKI WIDOW *by JUANITA SHERIDAN* (CRIME CLUB, $2.75)	". . . it isn't really a case . . . but . . . many moments of personal charm." (AB)	". . . cast . . . seems a bit overcrowded, but the Sheridan touch . . . is as satisfying as ever." (LGO)
THE CUCKOO LINE AFFAIR *by ANDREW GARVE* (HARPER, $2.50)	". . . a somewhat off-balance book, but a consistently entertaining one . . ." (AB)	"Garve's store of new ideas seems inexhaustible . . . style . . . leisurely and absorbing." (LGO)
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KEY TO REVIEW SOURCES

AB: *Anthony Boucher in the New York Times*

FC: *Frances Crane in the Evansville Press*

SC: *Sergeant Cuff in The Saturday Review*

H-M: *Brett Halliday and Helen McCloy in the Westport (Conn.) Town Crier*

DBH: *Dorothy B. Hughes in the Los Angeles Daily News*

LGO: *Lenore Glen Offord in the San Francisco Chronicle*

FP: *Fay Profilet in the Saint Louis Post-Dispatch*

AdV: *Avis de Voto in the Boston Globe*

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